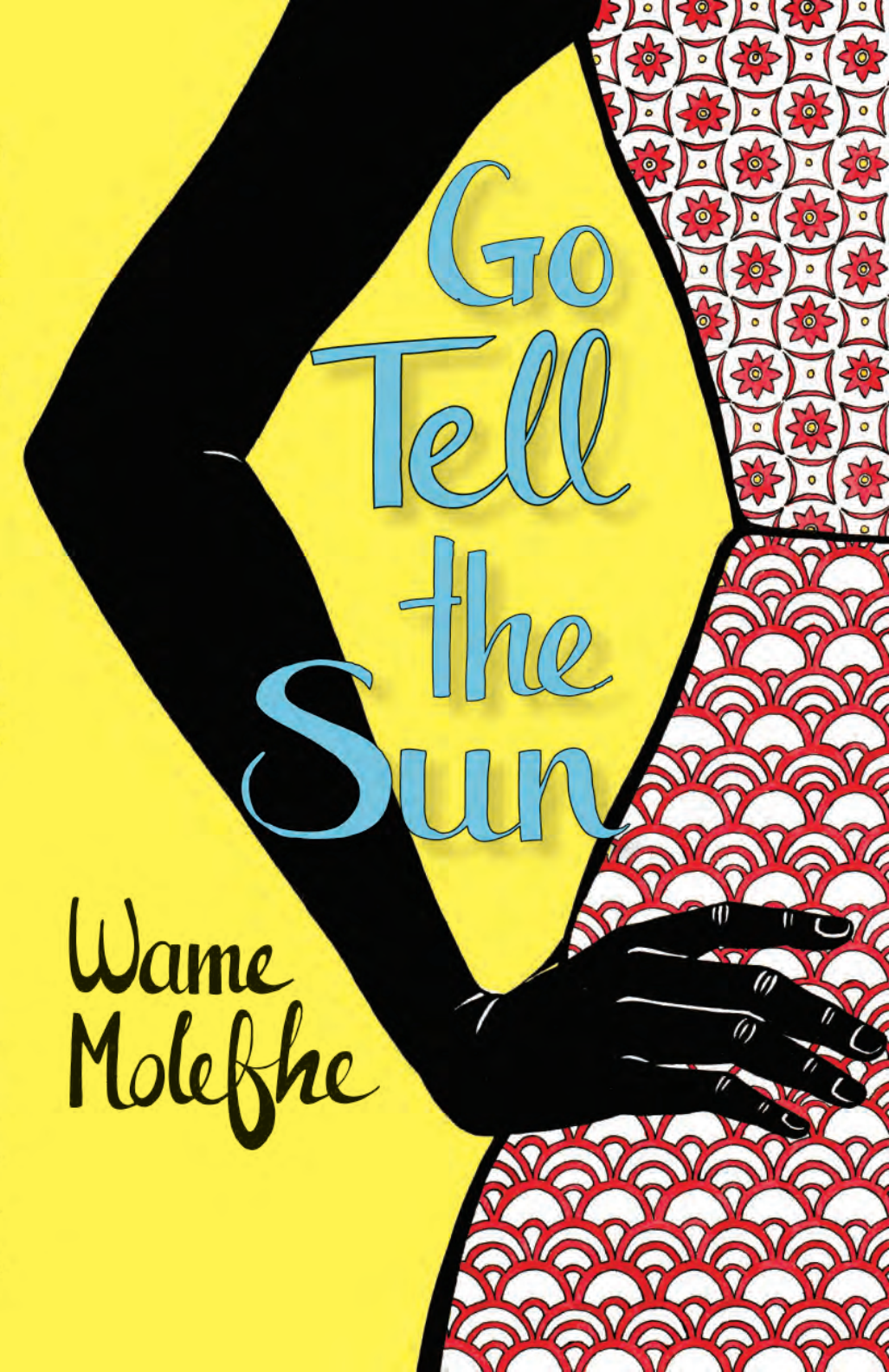


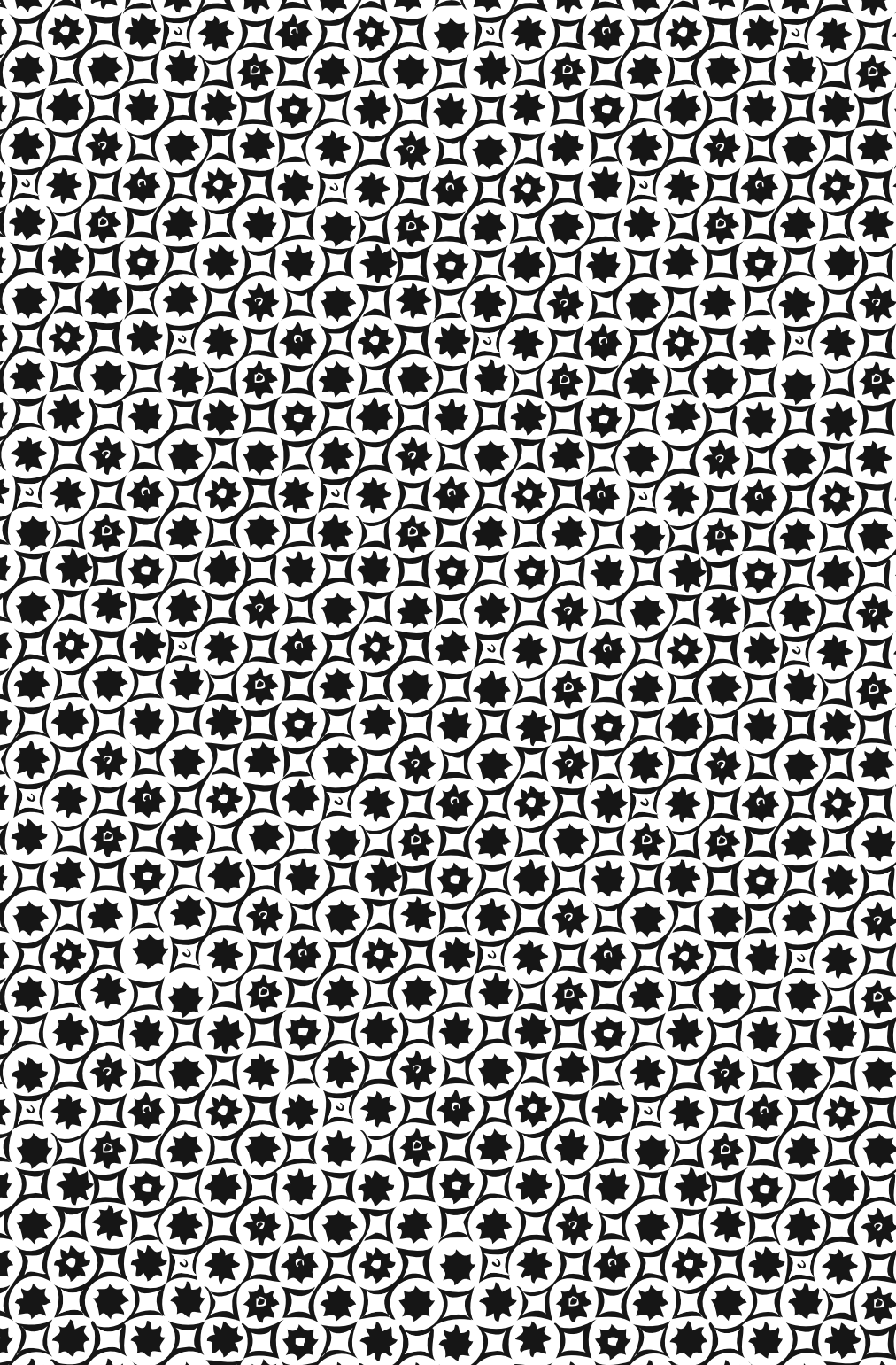


Go Tell the Sun

Wame
Molefhe

VISIT...

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Go
Tell
the Sun

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Wame Molefhe



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For my mother, who taught me to read and my
father who encouraged me to write.

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Who Do You Tell?

SATURDAY MORNING and rays of sunlight are just beginning to warm our bedroom. It is time. I start to disentangle my leg from my husband's, freeze as his hand wanders across my breast. To brush the hand off would wake him, so I lie still and wait for the soft whistle from his nose to resume.

When I slipped into the sheets last night, I made sure to occupy my side of the bed, but our marriage has spawned habits that are now ingrained in us. The wall that exists by day crumbles as we sleep. We drift together, until our bodies entwine like the vines of a creeper – sleeping the way we did when we were newlyweds, wanting nothing to come between us.

I glance at his face as I slide off the bed. Images from five years ago collage in my head. I wore a white silk dress with a sweeping train that brushed all my mother's doubts under the red carpet. I swore to obey Ntsimane and forsake all others, smiling as he lifted away my veil to kiss me. With my small hand clasped in his, we danced to the song of ululating strangers who converged on us as we emerged from church, man and wife.

The early years of our marriage were blemish-free. My love for him wrapped its tentacles around us and squeezed out everything and everyone else. I discarded my habits and wore his. He loved me too, but his other women left me feeling empty, like the house across the street, with **“TO LET”** hanging on its gate, beckoning to passers by. Maybe my emptiness etched itself into a sign that read **“TO LOVE.”**

Ntsimane grunts as he turns on his side and I stare at the dribble that trickles from his slightly open mouth. Yet another blot on a stained marriage. I dress and close the door behind me.



Early morning and Gaborone city is rising. As I wait for the robots to change, a car full of revellers returning from a night out draws up next to me. Its passengers bounce up and down to the sounds of Vee. They bid me a drunken “good morning.” I laugh and wave back, driving carefully, skirting the potholes in the road as I leave the city centre.

A surreptitious glance in the rear view mirror confirms Botshelo’s presence behind me. I drive to the farthest end of the parking lot, as far from his black Mercedes as space allows. I slide my car between two vans.

Looking straight ahead, I stride past the hotel reception and down the passage, counting off the rooms in twos:

102, 104, 106... As I reach the designated room, my cell phone flashes eight o'clock. I silence it and tap on the door. He lets me in, hangs the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the doorknob, pulls me inside, twirls me around and kicks the door shut.



I wake up with my head nestled in the space between his arm and chest. "Botshelo, I must go now," I whisper.

He cups my face, a hand on each cheek, nibbles the hollow in my neck and presses his lips to my forehead. "I love you Sethunya."

I taste myself on his breath. He opens the door just a little, glances outside, and pushes it wider to let me out. I sashay towards my car, swaying my hips a little more than usual – for him. I feel his eyes as he watches me through the space between the curtain and window, but I do not look back. I never do. Instead, I glance at my watch. It was a present from Ntsimane, when anniversaries were still a reason to celebrate. Eleven o'clock. There is just enough time to do the shopping, to go home and cook for my husband.

Gaborone city has woken up during my three-hour hiatus and the streets teem with cars and people. I melt into the numbers. It takes me an hour to shop; sixty minutes to revert to being Ntsimane's wife again.

I slow down as an ambulance speeds down the Western bypass. It turns left at the ZCC church and stops. Traffic crawls as I drive from Molapo Crossing Mall to the Grand Palm Hotel circle. Probably another accident. Two little boys scamper barefoot across the road, shaking their heads, clapping their hands, “Ijaaaa! Monna, ke Mercedes o montsho. O o bone, monna?” A black Mercedes. I brake, almost stall, crane my neck to see beyond the gathering crowd. But Mercs are as common as Toyotas in Gaborone; besides, Botshelo lives on the other side of town.

I continue on my way home but slow down as three cows dart across the road and stop to graze on the grass. Their guardian, a young herd boy, trots behind them; he whistles to get them moving again. The local abattoir is minutes away.

I head straight from car to kitchen, arms aching under the weight of ingredients destined to create gastronomic delights for Ntsimane. An act of contrition for errant ways. In the plastic bag there are a frilly black bra and panties. Botshelo loves black.

I am in the kitchen, preparing Ntsimane’s favourite dessert, floating between stove and sink. Botshelo’s voice whispers in my head: “Come away with me Sethunya.” A smile teases my lips, and I nod: “Yes, Botshelo.” Tonight I will pack my bags and tell Ntsimane I am leaving his sorry, cheating ass and never coming back. I need to tell him now, whilst I am still buoyed by Botshelo’s loving. I clear my throat.

“Ntsimane. We must talk. Now, please.”

“Shhhh, Sethunya. Wait. The news.” He dismisses me with the back of his hand. And so I replay the words in my head. I will not mention Botshelo. After all, Ntsimane is the reason I am leaving; Botshelo is just the catalyst, hastening the inevitable but remaining detached. And so I wait for the news to end and then, I vow, I will tell him.

I only raise my eyes when someone says Botshelo’s name. I look up at the television screen. Botshelo’s face stares back at me. The headlines come on again. The newsreader’s mouth opens and closes, words tumble out, crashing my world: “Award-winning Motswana writer dies in car accident.”

Killed? Killed.

Ntsimane changes the channel. Why did he do that? Does he know? He couldn’t. I have told no one.

I close the kitchen door and feel my legs buckle. I cling to the kitchen table. My heart pounds in my ears. How? When? I beat the eggs and sugar together faster. Jam, vinegar, flour. A spoonful at a time. Sequestered in the kitchen, away from Ntsimane, I force in long, deep breaths, wheeze instead. Botshelo is dead. Breathe. Breathe.

What is that noise? Sizzling – coming from the stove. The oxtail stew is burning.

I pull the pot off the hotplate just in time. Now it is time to eat. I sit at the dinner table, across from Ntsimane. I stare at my plate, push the butternut around the dumpling, around the *morogo*. I do not eat. I cannot eat.

He does not see. He scrapes the very last drop of gravy from his plate and licks it off his finger. I sip my water, listen to the stove timer counting down thirty minutes. 29... tick-tock, tick-tock, 20, 10, 3, 1. The Malva pudding is done. A perfect ending to a perfect meal.

An unseen drummer begins his rendition behind my eyes. He taps gently, quietly at first. Within a few minutes, the drumming reaches a crescendo. My head feels like it will explode. I push my chair out.

“Eish, Ntsimane, I’m not feeling well all of a sudden. I need to lie down.”

“You said you wanted to talk Sethunya.”

I read the question on his face.

“Yes... I do, I mean I did, but I have a terrible pain, over here.” And I press my hand to my chest to quieten my heart.

I lie in the dark room, staring at the ceiling. Botshelo’s death amplifies the noises I stopped hearing when he first told me he loved me. When Ntsimane goes out, the scrunch of tyres on the gravel driveway rumbles in my ears.

I feel the bed sag when he returns as the sun rises, from places unknown. A woman’s perfume clogs my nose, making me coil my body into a question mark to face the wall. I pray for forgiveness – for asking why Botshelo and not Ntsimane? I wake up, impaled by unspoken grief, on my side of the bed.

I get up and stand in front of the mirror, practising my goodbyes through swollen eyes. “Ntsimane, I am leaving,”

is what I will say. But when he asks if I am unwell, I answer with a “why?”

“You look terrible.”

“It’s nothing. It’s probably just the flu coming on.”

And so I baptize my secret, heart-wrenching grief – “the flu”. It explains my red eyes, aching joints, the incessant tattoo behind my eyes. It justifies why I must sleep in the spare bedroom.



The telephone rings. Ntsimane answers and holds it out to me. “It’s for you.”

“Hi Sethunya. Have you heard about the writer?”

The words gush from Kgomotso’s mouth, creating waves of fear in me. I do not know how to respond. She is my childhood friend and knows me so well – but then, I sink to the depths of deception and respond:

“The writer... no... no. Which one?”

“Ao? How many famous writers do you know? Botshelo Gontse.”

“Botshelo... Gontse,” I draw out his name and shake my head. “Ga ke mo itse. But shame.”

I shed Botshelo with one little lie. There and then I learn that deception is easier in my mother tongue. Kgomotso is quiet and I hold my breath, afraid she will remember. She plucks the memory out, like a weed.

“But you told me about him. Remember? You said you had met him at some party... you said you’d wished you weren’t married?”

“Ao? Nyaaaa... Kgomotso. Me? No... not me.” I layer the second lie on the first and swallow, but feel as though the words are lodged in my throat.

“Sethunya, are you okay? Is that husband of yours misbehaving again? Do you want me to come over?”

“No, no. I’m fine – really. Just a little busy right now. Let me call you back later.”

Ntsimane scours my face as I put down the phone and his eyes ask questions I will never answer. I wade through the silence to open the window, treading carefully, like a drunk trying to act sober. Ntsimane is still looking at me when I turn around, so I open another window.

“Did you know him?”

“Him, who?”

“The writer.”

“Not really,” but I can’t leave it at that, “Not very well. I just read his books.”

The sweet smell of the *morula* tree wafts through the window, flushing away my fear.

I remember whispering to Kgomotso about Botshelo when he was just a possibility, a fantasy that warmed my cheeks when it crossed my mind. When I lived it out, I made it my secret.



Like a thief I steal away from my home as the sun rises. It is seven days since I lay with Botshelo and swore to love him forever. Today I am burying him.

I dress in semi-darkness and don the uniform of a respectable Motswana woman: a brown dress that covers my ankles, stockings, pumps, a shawl across my shoulders and a *doek* to cover my hair. It is an unlikely costume for a temptress.

I glance at Ntsimane as I close the door behind me.



I drive to Botshelo's house. A security guard directs me to an empty space between the cars that line the length of the street in both directions. I am just opening my car door when Ntsimane's woman walks past. What if she sees me and tells Ntsimane? But anger thrusts fear away and marches me through the gate to Botshelo's home.

The funeral green tent spans the width of the yard like a giant umbrella, casting a shadow across the household. A hand extends a funeral programme to me. I take it.

It has his picture on the front – a big, colour picture, on expensive, textured paper. I run my finger over his face. A younger Botshelo – in graduation garb, unsmiling and stiff. Yet he laughed all the time when we were together.

The MC's strident voice urges us to hurry – the casket is about to be closed. He reminds me of an auctioneer.

“Going, going, gone!” It is my last chance to see Botshelo, but I cannot do it. As I hesitate, throngs of people wanting to get past elbow me into motion. I stumble forward, and follow in the footsteps of a girl teetering ahead of me on high heels.

We walk in a straight line, like ants, one after the other, into the house, and then around the casket. I reach his head, look once. He is smiling at me. I look again, long and hard this time. But his eyes are closed. He used to smile with his eyes. I want to trace his eyebrows with my finger, skim my lips across his and hear him catch his breath – but my legs keep moving.

Behind the closed door his wife lies. As custom dictates, she has lain prostrate on a mattress on the floor, sheathed in black from head to toe, since the title of widow was bestowed on her. She is waited on and consoled by everyone who sees her. I am the interloper, without an accomplice, so my grief, the spoils of my crime, goes unshared.

I head towards the tent, needing to sit. But all the chairs are taken so I stand in the shadow of a man I do not know and listen as speeches are made. He nods. So does the woman next to him. I want to scream, “No, no, you did not know him.” But the sound remains trapped in my head. These people did not know him as I did. They did not know us.

Ours was a passionate, pure love that defied societal dictates. A union concealed by day, but indulged in when shadows were longest. He was ambitious, poised for

bigger and better things in life, and needed unfettered love. I also thirsted for love. When we met... I smile at the recollection.

My memories are jarred by the sound of a man coughing. He steps up to the podium and pushes the microphone away. He tips his head to one side, like Botshelo did as he weighed which words to speak. His hands tremble but his voice is steady.

“Ke nna *mooki*. Botshelo ga a lwala багаetsho. Botshelo was not taken by illness. He was on his way home from a business meeting when he was killed by a reckless kombi driver who went through a robot without stopping.”

The crowd murmurs its disapproval and the man next to me shakes his head and says: “Eish. Car accidents are going to finish off Batswana.”

The *mooki* continues: “He died on the spot. We are still shocked. That is how my only brother, my best friend, died. May his soul rest in peace.”

What I suspected is confirmed. Botshelo died on his way home from me. *Ijooo... Botshelo I am so sorry. So sorry.* Trying to hide the tears that roll down my face, I fumble inside my bag, looking for my sunglasses. The woman next to me pats little circles on my back with her palm. I stare at the ground.

Finally, the speeches end. I walk to my car, sit inside and start the engine. There is a knock on my window.

“Dumela mma.”

Before I respond, the front passenger door opens. Then the rear doors are flung open and suddenly I have

three passengers accompanying me on the ten kilometre ride to the cemetery. The cortege travels fast. Life is fast in Gaborone city. Pedestrians go about their business undeterred, only turning their heads to admire the expensive cars that drive past them. One old man pauses and attempts to squat, in respect of the dead. His joints fail to yield so he leans on his walking stick, holds his hat to his chest and bows his head.

I am a stranger in my car. “What a waste.” “He was really going places.” “And you could tell he was a devoted husband.” “Shame, his poor wife.” My passengers “eee” in unison. I yearn to hear more, but they shift to planning their day’s activities. The funeral is a momentary diversion in their otherwise mundane day.

Finally, we reach the graveyard. They clamber out of the car and continue with their conversation. For a minute, I do not move, then I open the windows. One of the men is wearing Botshelo’s cologne.

I get out and watch eight men collectively tense their biceps and pull the casket out of the hearse. A-one, a-two, a-three, up. They balance it on the green straps. I stare as it disappears into the grave and flinch as the first shovelful of soil hits the wood with a thud. Men of all shapes and sizes line up to help fill the grave – like a well-oiled assembly line, one man shovels, sets the spade down on the ground, the one behind him picks it up and so it continues until it is finished and our love is forever buried under a mound of dirt. People stream out of the cemetery, talking to one another, smiling.

I walk alone. I glance at my watch. Eleven o'clock. I have just enough time to shop before I go home to cook for my husband.

Sethunya Likes Girls Better

IT WAS the headline that caught her eye.

APE ON THE RUN IS SHOT DEAD

Johnnie, a forty-one year old chimpanzee, was shot dead by staff after he escaped from his enclosure... Hundreds of visitors were told to lock themselves in their cars. The drama unfolded in the morning, soon after the zoo opened... An employee described Johnnie as a “bit of a thug”.

When asked why Johnnie was killed, the game warden gave the following statement: “An informed decision was taken to shoot the chimpanzee. Management believed that Johnnie presented a very real threat to the human population. Investigations have commenced to establish the cause of the chimpanzee’s escape. We are all grieving for Johnnie.”

Sethunya pictured the scene at the zoo: cars filling the parking lot, buses offloading camera-carrying tourists, children laughing, and the clamour of foreign tongues as sightseers jostled for seats in the Land Rovers waiting to take them to the man-made lake. The air at the top of the hill had made her feel like she was closer to heaven and, down below, troops of monkeys scampered through bush. Farther away, impala and duiker leapt across the grass.

Visitors followed a gravel path from the lake to the animal enclosures, parents holding tight to their children's hands to keep them at a respectful distance from the wild creatures. They gathered around the chimpanzees' cage, and listened as the guide pointed out Johnnie and his mate. Cameras flashed. A boy broke away from the rest and faced up to Johnnie, pounding his fists against his chest and grunting, until his mother dragged him back with an angry slap and the group moved on.

Then Johnnie escaped.



Sethunya thought of how she had fled her mother's home, to become Thato's wife. Thato was a good man, kind and gentle, and when Father Simon said "You may kiss your bride," when Thato lifted her veil and looked into her eyes, she knew he loved her and that his love would put to rest those other thoughts she sometimes had.

After the church ceremony, she had returned to the home she had grown up in for the last time. She had stepped out of stilettos into flat sandals, and exchanged the white silk gown for a traditional *leteisi* to wait with her mother for her relatives who would deliver her to her in-laws.

“Sethunya, you must wear something on your head.”

She had watched her mother search in her chest of drawers for a scarf with which to cover her hair. She had watched her rummaging around in her sewing box for a pin to secure a shawl across her shoulders. She had felt her sigh as she pinned the brooch on.

“Please listen to what the women tell you, my child,” her mother had said. “They know what marriage is.”

“Don’t worry, Mma. I won’t embarrass you.”

She did not respond.

“Mma, why aren’t you coming?”

“It’s not allowed.”

“Why not?” But she knew, even before her mother had said the words.

“This is how things are done.”

Sethunya’s aunt had arrived to fetch her niece then, and they had stood together outside her mother’s home, three good Batswana women, watching as the trunk her mother had packed was hauled on to the back of a van. It had taken four muscled men to lift it. Her mother had filled it to bursting with pretty new bed linen, ordered from her special catalogue: down pillows, snow-white sheets with pretty flowers, an embroidered eiderdown,

and blankets. When it was time for her to leave, Sethunya held her mother's hand.

"Trust in God," her mother said, "and everything will be fine."

Tied to the front gate of her in-laws' home, a triangular white cloth had waved in the breeze, announcing that there would be a wedding and everyone was welcome. By the veranda, little girls sang "Monyadi wa rona. O tshwana le naledi." Our bride looks as lovely as a star.

As Sethunya approached the house, men and women had rushed to claim her and she was swept into the throng of swirling skirts and stomping feet. When the joyous reception lulled, the men and young girls resumed their roles, leaving the married women to complete the last marriage ritual.

Sethunya sat village-style, with her legs tucked under her, on a goat skin, looking up at the women who encircled her. They reminded her of her mother: the same age, the same wraparound *mateisi*, and plaited hair hidden under *doeks*, the same conviction that marriage was a good woman's trophy.

She had not known what to expect; only what she had gleaned from conversations whispered by girls who knew no more than she – that married women were going to tell her what society expected of a good Motswana wife.

Her nervousness had played out in the way she toyed with her wedding ring, twisting it round and round and then pulling it off and slipping it back on again. A woman

sitting behind her tapped her shoulder and whispered into her ear: “Ga e rolwe.”

Sethunya had slipped her hands beneath her thighs and smiled. Yes, she would get used to her wedding ring and, like the woman had said, she would never take it off.

Her father’s sister had spoken first.

“When a woman marries, her life changes; she must leave behind unmarried friends.”

“A wife does not ask her husband where he has been when he comes home.”

“A woman must cook for her husband,” said another aunt.

“Bear him a son.”

“Care for his parents.”

“Do not discuss your marriage with others.”

“Pray.”

She had wanted to ask who made these rules. But she knew the answer. This is how things are done.

Then her mother-in-law had stood up and undone the *doek* that Sethunya wore on her head, replacing it with one she took out of her bag. She picked up a jug of water and an empty glass and began to pour the water into the glass. The glass overflowed and water spilt onto the sand, but she kept pouring until the jug was empty.

“You’re my daughter now and my heart overflows with love for you,” she said.

As Sethunya had stood up, she felt tears sting her eyes. She wiped them away as she stood up to hug her new

mother. Yes, this was how things were meant to be. No one could then say she liked girls better.



Sethunya imagined Johnnie hurtling over picnic tables, chasing freedom, chasing the sun, frightening old men as they hobbled across the park hand-in-hand with their grandchildren.

The game warden, in his worn leather sandals and white socks and rifle in hand, charged after Johnnie. She heard the first bullet rip through Johnnie's skull, felt the second go through his heart and she saw Johnnie running, slower and slower, as if in a movie in slow-motion replay, till he crumpled to the ground in front of the sign with chipped paint that said "Don't feed the animals". Blood pooling around his coal-black head, Johnnie died with his eyes open.



"What's wrong?" Thato whispered. He moved closer to Sethunya, rousing her from her daydream, but she was still at the zoo, wondering why the zookeeper hadn't warned Johnnie first. He could have fired a bullet into the

air, or maybe tranquilized him like they did on wildlife programmes.

She shook her head, wondering if the bullet that went through Johnnie's heart had pierced his soul. She wondered if animals had souls. She knew God gave people souls and their souls went to heaven when they died – if they'd been good on earth. She remembered Noah's ark and how the animals went in two by two. God saved the animals from the terrible floods so he must have given them souls too, like people. She prayed her soul would go to heaven when she died because every day she tried to be a good Motswana woman.

She was thinking about souls, of God and Church, and Father Simon when Thato pulled her closer to him.

“Sethunya...”

She knew what he wanted, but she was still thinking of Johnnie and she felt like she was going to cry, so she held on tighter to the newspaper to escape Thato's embrace.

“Later. Let me finish reading this,” she whispered.

She was thinking that Johnnie must have been so fed up with having people looking at him all day that he snapped. He must have seen the gate open and leapt to freedom, feeling in his heart that he was in a place he did not belong. He yearned for the wide-open veld, with its expanse of earth, where he could snack on leaves plucked from green shrubs. He wanted to close his eyes and enjoy the feel of his mate picking fleas out of his fur; to run freely with others in his troop, the way free chimpanzees do.

Sethunya thought Johnnie just wanted to go home, and even though home was a place that lived only in the depths of his head, he would know when he arrived. He would know when he filled his lungs with clean air that he was truly alive.

“No,” she said as she slipped away from Thato’s arms. She was tired of trying. She had tried so hard. She had prayed to feel something other than love of a brother for her husband, but she couldn’t.

“They killed Johnnie, a chimpanzee at the zoo.” She didn’t expect him to understand the sadness that lived within her and made her impervious to his touch. She knew he couldn’t, but she was fine with that because otherwise he was a good husband: patient and kind and generous. He made her feel safe.



When she was young, Sethunya wore the frilly dresses with tiny flowers her mother dressed her in. And when her mother pinched her thigh and said “Sit like a girl,” she crossed her legs tightly and pulled the skirt over her scabbed knees. But even as she sat in church, listening to the Word, she heard the shouts of the boys who played football down the road. She wished that church would be over so she could go and watch the game.

“Goal-oooo!” they cheered. She wanted so much to play with them but her mother said good girls played netball.

Kgomotso, her best friend, played football. Kgomotso’s mother said girls could be anything they wanted to be – just like boys. She walked home with Kgomotso, held her hand, skipped and laughed with her. When the other girls laughed and giggled about boys, she thought only of Kgomotso.

And then one day Kgomotso kissed her, making Sethunya feel warm in places that good girls only whispered about. Goose bumps rose on her arms as her friend ran her hands up and down her back. She felt heat in the tips of her fingers and felt it warm her cheeks.

Sethunya went to her friend’s home every day after that kiss – wanting more – until a boy from their church had seen them and whispered and whispered some more until the words had reached her mother’s ears. She wore her saddest face as she spoke to Sethunya.

“Stay away from there, do you hear me? A good girl does not behave that way.”

That warning had been enough.

“We can’t be friends anymore,” Sethunya had told her friend. She enveloped Kgomotso in her heart and tried to send her away, but Kgomotso stayed.

Sethunya prayed. She went to church and knelt in front of the Virgin Mary, praying for forgiveness, but prayer did not tame what she felt. When she did not know where

else to turn, she walked into the confessional and, head bowed, she spoke.

“Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been too long since my last confession... I’ve had impure thoughts.” She hesitated, and as she did, she felt the walls of the tiny room constrict as if to squeeze the sin from her. “I’ve been with a woman.” She heard her heart pounding in her head and added, “and for that I am truly sorry.”

Then she waited and the silence grew and filled the room, making her want to flee. But then from behind the curtain, a voice said: “Twenty Hail Mary’s my child.”

She had said many more, fervently, and prayer fortified her weak flesh.



Sethunya read the story again and dabbed the corners of her eyes with the sheet. How silly of her, crying for an animal like it was a person. She thought of Kgomotso then. Sometimes she was a melody that ruffled her memory, or the languidness of a woman’s walk.

She was in a kombi once when she thought she saw Kgomotso leaning against a tree. Ebony skin, clean-shaven head and the ever present giant hoops in her ear. One of the passengers had said he hated women who pretended to be men. “Look at that one over there,” and then he laughed. “That one, all she needs is a real man to

teach her how to be a woman.” The man in front of her laughed, so did the woman sitting next to her. Sethunya shrank into her seat and took out a lipstick from her bag, smearing mauve over her shame.

Sethunya shook her head to dislodge the thoughts, folded the paper away carefully and placed it on top of the kist. She slid her legs off the bed, slowly, so she didn’t wake Thato.

She was tiptoeing out of the room when he spoke: “Tell me, Sethunya.”

Sethunya froze, and then she turned slowly to look at him. “Tell you what?”

“Why I make you sad.”

She wished Thato hadn’t spoken – that he had left her in the faraway place her mind sometimes wandered to, but he was her husband, and so for him she smiled until she felt the smile touch her eyes.

“How can you think that? You don’t make me sad. I was just thinking. Sundays do that to me. When I was growing up, Sundays were special. Mama cooked chicken and rice; dessert was guavas and custard. I wore frilly frocks and my mother called Sunday “The Lord’s Day.” She could hear herself bubbling over like a pot of meat on a too-high flame.

“But it *is* the Lord’s Day,” Thato said and he sang, softly, for her, the hymn they’d sung at church that morning. Although they had been married five years, his voice still had the ability to halt her mid-sentence. She should have followed him, wrapped her voice around his. She knew

that was what he wanted, but at that moment, thoughts of Kgomotso entered her mind, unbidden, unwanted.

“Come.” Still she did not move and he said again: “It will be okay, Sethunya.”

She sat back down on the bed then. She wished she could shed her unhappiness. She wished, sometimes, he was less good, more like other men who went out drinking nights and returned at dawn, sometimes not at all, who had other women and lied and cheated. If Thato was like that she would have had good reason to leave.

But she knew she would never leave Thato. The thought of life without him immobilised her. That is why she had stayed, fighting to keep Kgomotso out of her thoughts, trying not to wish for more. Most times she managed to keep her at bay, but on this night, as she lay with her husband, Kgomotso came alive.

And that is when they chased her. Their feet stomped the earth, spurring her to run, making her flee from outstretched arms that wanted to grab her and tie her down: her mother, Father Simon, sad-eyed women wearing *doeks*. She ran faster, her mouth gaping, gulping down air to flush out the fear that clogged her lungs. She tripped, but dragged herself up and, as she did, she saw a door at the end of the road. She raced for it and suddenly she felt lighter as the fear lifted her and she was running so fast her feet barely touched the ground. Finally, she was beyond the door. She looked back to find Kgomotso, but as she stood waiting, the door clanged shut, Father Simon locked it and flung away the key.

She woke to Monday morning: the sound of her neighbour's grass broom as the woman swept her yard, kombis hooting, schoolchildren laughing, Thato yawning. He pulled her closer to him and she let him. She felt his warmth, his familiar solidity and steadfastness as he hugged her to him and kissed her forehead.

When he got out of bed, she smiled. She listened to the sound of his slippers footsteps as he padded down the passage to the bathroom. His voice carried over the water spray from the shower as he sang, and she smiled. These were the familiar sounds of her marriage enfolding her like a blanket on a wintry morning.

She got out of bed and aired the blankets, like her mother had taught her to. She stripped the bed, opened the kist and unfolded the white sheets with pretty pink flowers embroidered on the edge, but as she did, she heard voices begin to sing: *Sethunya likes girls. Sethunya likes girls better.*

Botswana Rain

IT WAS my mother who rang to tell me. She called at that ungodly hour of the night when messages of birth and death were usually conveyed. I felt the vibration of my cell phone on the bedside table.

“Sethu,” she said when I said hello, “I have sad, sad news for you.”

I knew then that it was serious. It was rare for my mother to call me by the name she used when I was a little girl, rarer for her not to know the right words to say.

“Kgomotso is gone.”

“What do you mean Mama?”

“She passed away.”

“No Mama... How...When?” I whispered, pressed the cell phone to my ear, and waited for her to speak. I listened to her breathing, heard my heart beating in my head. I regretted asking the cause of Kgomotso’s death, but I needed to know, even though I myself despised the way Botswana people probed the cause of a person’s death the way a nurse felt your arm, searching for the right vein from which to draw blood.

“She committed suicide. They found her body yesterday. The funeral will be on Saturday. And, Sethu, she left you a note.”

A note? Why did Kgomotso take her life and why did she leave *me* a note? Fear frothed in my stomach like cola when you drop a pebble in it.

My husband, Thato, lay fast asleep beside me. He slept like our baby did, mouth slightly open, an arm cradling his head.

What if Kgomotso’s note exposed my secret? I stole out of bed, taking care not to wake him, wondering if I would ever sleep so soundly again.



When I was a little girl, life was well-ordered. Winters were cold and dry, summers were hot and moist – the way my Geography textbook said Botswana weather should be. When it rained, I raced outside and squelched the mud between my toes. I waved my fingers in the air shouting “Rain, rain make me grow,” as I chased after corn crickets that appeared with the rainbow, like marching soldiers.

After the rain, I played football barefoot in the sand, and didn’t care that people mistook me for a boy. When the sun got too hot, I rested in the shade with my legs drawn up, my elbows on my knees. Mama would creep up behind me and clap her hands, like crackling lightning,

saying, “Sethunya! Sit properly. You are not a herd boy.” I’d straighten my legs, and press my thighs together, trying to be more of a lady.

Back then, Kgomotso was my best friend. I was ten when her family moved into the house on our cul-de-sac. We liked lying on our backs together under the *morula* tree, holding hands, sucking on its yellow fruit. She was a dreamer, even then. I would tell her a silly story and laugh out loud. She’d say: “Shhhh Sethunya. Listen. The wind is whispering my future to me... listen. It says one day I’m going to fly to a faraway land where I’ll be whatever I dream.”

When my boy-hips filled out, my buttocks grew rounder and softer and the *morula*-sized knobs in my chest swelled, Mama said, “Boys are trouble. Run from trouble.”

But she needn’t have worried. Boys? They did not interest me. I was happiest when I was with Kgomotso and I did not want to share her. When all the girls in my class were whispering and giggling about boys, wondering who was going to ask who to the school-leaver’s ball, I really didn’t care. But all the same, I played the game. I did not want to be the odd one out.



As I grew older, life tested me. Home. School. Church. Everywhere, it seemed as if I was being cast into a mould.

In school I had to memorise what made dust different from dirt. I struggled to remember whether to sweep first then polish, or polish first then sweep. At home, Mama asked: “What kind of a woman are you going to become?” As I grew older, she graduated to: “Oh my Lord, what kind of a wife will she make?” I tried hard to be an obedient daughter, a good woman.

Every Sunday, I dressed up in my floral two-piece to attend the early morning church service. Whenever Father Simon warned “Hell is hotter than fire” and “Cast out the devil,” I felt flames singeing my body. I twisted and turned in my seat. I taught Sunday school, sang in the church choir and I feared the Lord. I so wanted to be God’s child and I had to go to heaven where everyone was family and everyone was happy.

I tried hard to douse that thing in me that caused me to lie awake at night, longing to be with Kgomotso, but I could not say no to her. When she held me close and pressed me to her, I promised that it would never happen again.



My love for Kgomotso was like Botswana rain. Unpredictable. I gave it sparingly. When she responded, I held my love back. Then she would cling to me, like a

clump of grass growing deep in the crack of a rock, trying to suck what moisture it could.

But now Kgomotso was dead... No! She had gone to that faraway land that I dreamed of in delicate pinks and pastel greens – where the sun didn't shine so bright and so long that it dried people's hearts and made them hard as biltong. Yes, this thought consoled me.



I relived the last time I visited her. She'd called me, saying she needed to talk. We met at her house. When she hugged me, I let my arms hang limply by my side. She had seemed distant and her words stayed with me after I left, like puddles after the rain, murky and brown, concealing rocks beneath the surface.

“Do you ever think of me?” she wanted to know.

“Sometimes.”

“Do you love him?”

“But of course. He is my husband.”

“Maybe you could still come and visit... sometimes?”

I did not respond.

“Do you ever think of killing yourself?”

Her question had shocked me, but I said, “Never. Suicide is a mortal sin,” using my Sunday-school-teacher voice and my words stemmed her questions. She made me coffee, put in two sugars, no milk – the way I always

made it. She watched me as I ate the cake she offered me – chocolate cake, my favourite. But soon the silence between us became unbearable.

I left.



Although I did not want him to, Thato went with me to Kgomotso's funeral. He was my husband and he always did what was right; that was his way. We drove in silence from our home to hers. I stared out of the window, worrying about what Kgomotso's note might reveal.

Her home seemed further away than I remembered, but maybe it was because Thato drove slowly. Rain had gouged out the surface of the road, creating a patchwork of grit, tar and potholes. As we approached her home, I saw a woman sitting alone in the shade of the *morula* tree, where I used to sit with Kgomotso, pretending to the world that we were just friends.



Sitting beside Thato as he drove, I thought back to when I met him. I was twenty-three. He had just returned from overseas. He played the organ and sang in church. I fell

in love with his voice. When he sang, the notes rose from deep in his throat and filled the church. He laughed easily. His shoulders were broad and he towered over me, and I had to tilt my head to look into his eyes. He'd been walking me home after choir practice for a few weeks. One evening he asked, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"How come? How can a girl so beautiful she was named "flower" not have a boyfriend?"

"Maybe I was waiting for you," I said and smiled.

He laughed, took my hand and turned it over in his. Then he stroked my palm. My hand seemed so tiny in his but his touch was gentle, like a woman's. "I like you," he said, "a lot."

I smiled. Thato liked me. Out of all the women whose dreams he touched, he chose me. I thought of Kgomotso and I snatched my hand out of Thato's. He looked at me and said, "Sometimes I look at you, Sethunya, and wonder whether you are here with me."

"Ao? Re mmogo, Thato. I am with you. You have never seen me with anyone else, have you?"

He shook his head and said, "One day, Sethunya, you will take me with you, to that place where you go."

I smiled. It seemed simpler than finding words for something I couldn't explain. In that moment, I learnt that lying was easier done in my mother tongue.

After a year of dating, Thato sent his uncles to my house. I arrived home to the smell of rum-and-maple tobacco. Thato's pipe-smoking uncle had come to our

home to tell my uncles that their nephew was looking for a *segametsi*, a bearer of water. Even before his pipe's aroma had left the room, Mama called Father Simon and announced "Sethunya is to be married." A month later, ten head of cattle arrived, on the hoof, with Thato racing behind them. Our families had spoken. I would be Thato's wife.

I saw pride in the way Mama swung her hips on her way to the front pew in church. She held her head upright as if she was balancing a bucketful of water on it. I heard the pride when she trilled her notes higher than everyone else when we sang the final verse. I felt her pleasure as she caressed the soft silks she said would make me a lovely bridal gown.

Her excitement was contagious. I wore a white wedding dress with a long zip and darts that lifted my breasts and skimmed my thighs on its way down to my ankles. It had a sweeping train that brushed all my doubts under the red carpet that led into the church. I repeated after Father Simon that I would love and obey my husband, in sickness and in health, and recited all the other words meant to define marriage.

When Father Simon said "I now pronounce you man and wife," Thato eagerly lifted my veil to kiss me. I smiled, a demure smile, befitting of a good woman. With my hand clasped in his, we danced to "Fiela, fiela, fiela ngwanyana" as ululating strangers converged on us while we greeted the congregation, man and wife. It began to drizzle as

we emerged from the church. Tiny raindrops mixed with confetti and everyone agreed we were blessed.

“Remember to thank the Lord for giving you such a wonderful husband,” my mother said.



On the first morning of our married life, as I lay next to Thato, gentle raindrops tapped on the windows like a timid man's knock. It was a change from the Botswana rain I knew that usually boomed and thundered as if God raged.

I twisted my hand this way and that and watched my ring sparkle. I wanted to lie still in bed and listen to the rain; listen to my thoughts. When I closed my eyes I smelt coconut and strawberry. I remembered Kgomo¹ and smiled sadly.

“Tell me, Sethunya. You know you can tell me what is on your mind,” Thato whispered as he traced my lips with his finger.

“Ah, I'm just happy for the rain,” I said, but his words stole the smile from my eyes and I slid out of his arms. I would have stayed in bed if he had not spoken and soiled my memories.

When Thato told me he loved me, I held my body in expectation of another feeling: the feeling that swept me up on a wave when Kgomo¹ skimmed my neck with

her lips. I smelt the sweet coconut in her hair, tasted the strawberries on her lips. My nipples stiffened as if pecked by a cold breeze and I felt warm in places whose names I did not say out loud. Then she took my hand in hers and we lay together on her bed, soaring to the lands I had only dreamed of.

I was thinking of Kgomotso as I lay next to my husband; thinking how silence did not threaten her, did not disquiet her like it did Thato.

I remembered how I had told her about him. It was a Sunday, after church, the day I usually visited. I waited for her to settle into the couch and then I took the chair furthest from her.

“How do I say this? You know that I have been seeing Thato, don’t you?”

“Seeing him? You said he was a good friend.”

“He is a good friend... a very good friend. He has asked me to marry him. I have said yes. We are going to move. He’s got a job, in Johannesburg.”

She looked away, bewildered as a bird that had flown into a window pane. And then she looked at me and said: “Poor Thato. You are making the biggest mistake of your life, Sethunya.”

“But, Kgomotso, you knew this would happen one day. How could we go on? I live with the fear of being found out. Imagine the shame. The police... jail...”

“Ah, it’s your life. Keep lying to yourself.”

I could not respond. She did not walk me out of the house to the gate like she usually did. She had closed the

front door as I stepped out. I don't know if she watched me stride down the path to the gate. I didn't look back. What did she know about legitimate love?

I stopped going to her house after that day, avoiding the places she frequented. When I saw her in the street, I greeted her politely, like I did old people, "Dumela mma. O teng, mma?" Whenever her name was mentioned, I pretended not to hear; or I echoed the sounds that other people made when they talked about her. They called her terrible names and said she was trying to be a man. She was sick, they said, and all she needed was a man to cure her. What was wrong with her?

But when I was alone, thinking of Kgomotso filled me with yearning. I thought of her doe eyes that made her look sleepy, and imagined stroking her smooth olive skin and kissing her nose that sat small and pointed in her oval face.



The sun shone at first when we arrived at Kgomotso's home. But as the funeral service progressed, rain clouds gathered like cattle being rounded up. Soon, rain pounded the earth and kicked the smell of just-wet soil into the air.

I had chosen my outfit carefully and covered my dread in the uniform of respectability. I wore a tent-like dress, a shawl across my shoulders, a *doek* on my head and dark

sunglasses. Walking beside my husband, my high heels made squelching sounds, kisses to waterlogged soil. I was a good Motswana woman.

As they lowered Kgomotso's coffin into the flooded grave, it floated, bumping and banging the sides of the hole. Men took shovels to fill it and the thud of mud landing on the wood fell on my soul. Thato took off his jacket and draped it over my shoulders, and then he too picked up a shovel. I watched the muscles in his arms bunch as he covered my love with soil and I felt tears sting my eyes. I blinked and blinked to keep the tears from falling.

Kgomotso's mother gave me the envelope when I went into the house to pay my respects. I felt her watching me as I turned it over in my hand and slipped it into my bag. I took it out again and tore it open, slowly:

S.

Just couldn't take it. I'm going to a better place.

Kgomotso

That was all. After reading the words to myself, I folded it away again.

Her words were as bland as the funeral food we had eaten, but I understood. She had signed her name with her characteristic giant loop to the "g" and double lines underneath. I remembered how we used to practise our signatures.

"Don't press down so hard on the paper," I would say.

"I can't do flowery like you, Sethunya."

I wanted to cry till I gasped for breath. I wanted to wear black and lie prostrate like my custom demanded of a widow, cocooned in grief so everyone knew that I had lost a part of me. Instead, I remained dry-eyed like a man. No one said “Ao shame. Poor soul. It will be okay. Just be strong,” to me.

I saw Thato looking at me but I didn’t offer to give him the note. He didn’t ask to see it.



The morning after her funeral, lying in bed next to Thato, I was aching for Kgomotso. I knew now that I should have run away with her; I hoped that one day I would find her in that oasis where everyone was happy.

This was what I was thinking when Thato touched my shoulder. But I moved away from him and closed my eyes.

Then our son called: “Papa.”

I watched Thabo get out of bed and lift him from his cot. He brought our child, Lerang, to our bed, lay down and laid Lerang on his chest.

We lay together in silence, my husband, my son and me.

The Vigil

MY BEST friend was dead and buried.

Lebo's mother said a short illness killed her. I was relieved I had been spared having to bury her. I had been in England, far away enough from Botswana for Lebo's family and friends to understand I could not make it back in time for the burial.

I studied her funeral programme. It was all I had left of Lebo. Her badly printed face stared out at me from the front page. Lebo must have been about twenty when the picture was taken, but she already had that look. When we were in high school, our moral education teacher had stared at Lebo over her thin glasses, sucked her teeth and called it, "the look of Jezebel". That look got men – old men, young men, black, white – tripping over each other in a frenzied race to win her favour.

The names of the speakers were typed on the inside pages. Mr. Nthobatsang, Lebo's uncle, had spoken as the family representative. I knew him well. He must have worn his charcoal, wedding-cum-funeral double-breasted suit. That suit had been pressed so often the white pinstripes

had faded into grey. The vent at the back of the jacket gaped open, stretched by a rotund rear. I could almost hear his gravelly voice saying slowly, “Ngwana wa rona o re tlogetse re solohetse go le gontsi mo go ene.” Like a benevolent uncle, he would have described Lebo as a kind, obedient and generous niece – taken before her time.

The programme had “friend” written by hand. My name was crossed out. I would have spoken as Lebo’s friend had I been there. After all, Lebo and I had shared so much.

The *mooki*, the person who had nursed the deceased, was listed as third to speak. It was Lebo’s aunt, MmaDomi. MmaDomi was a councillor, with aspirations of becoming a Member of Parliament at the next elections. At the last funeral I attended, people had squirmed in embarrassment as MmaDomi revealed intimate details of the deceased person’s illness. When angry relatives confronted her afterwards, MmaDomi explained that she was only trying to de-stigmatise the disease. I hoped, this time, MmaDomi had chosen respect for the dead over sensationalism. Whichever way, the *mooki* always ended with, “this is how our child died. May her soul rest in peace.”

We say we should not speak ill of the dead. But there are those who defy our mores. They dig deep to uncover skeletons, buried under skeletons. They weave tales of wickedness, laced with innuendo, tinged with conjecture. We shake our heads disapprovingly but listen attentively, afraid we might hear our names mentioned. Oh yes, these

tales titillate us. We take comfort in knowing we are not as bad as the Lebos of this world.

Truth be told, I was not sad Lebo was dead. Sometimes, as I lay alone on my king-sized bed, I wondered how life without Lebo would be. I wished for Lebo's prince to come and whisk her away to *Lentswe la Baratani*, "Lovers' Hill," where folklore said lovers went and never returned. The truth was that I hated Lebo but I had not wanted Lebo's knight-in-shining armour to be a short illness with no name.

Sometimes, I got angry when I thought of Lebo. Anger festered inside me like a sore that refused to heal, but most times, thinking of her frightened me. The fear chilled my fingers and toes on a 39-degree November afternoon. It made my forehead feel hot to the touch on a wintry June morning. It crept stealthily up on me as I slept and made me sit bolt upright in the middle of the night.

It was six months since her death, but as I sat in my office, dwarfed by the man-sized mahogany desk, I felt the familiar pounding in my chest. An arrhythmic, pulsating beat surged to my head and banged against my temples. Voices joined in.

"Lebo is dead. May her soul rest in peace," they sang.

I made the sign of the cross with my right hand and pressed my hands together in prayer. They felt clammy. Fear filled my bladder. I went to the ladies.

"Dumela, mma," the tea-lady's respectful greeting reminded me of who I was. Women at my workplace thought I was invincible. I looked up, shortened my gait

and swayed my hips from side to side as I walked down the corridor. Entering the bathroom, I locked the door behind me and looked into the mirror.

Hazel eyes stared back at me. Tinted contacts did that. Blemish-free skin – make-up from overseas did that. Mine was not the face of a woman gripped by irrepressible fear.

As I wiped a bead of sweat off the tip of my minimised nose, another appeared on my forehead, then another. Rivulets of sweat ran down my back, gluing my silk blouse to my skin. Images, buried deep down where no one could see, were resurrected. They danced behind my eyelids – silhouettes of a man and woman. The woman's dress billowed in the air and swirled high above her knees. The man held out his hand to her. He twirled her round and round. Her dress flew off. The two came together. Their bare bodies twisted and turned. They writhed and moaned in ecstasy and repeated the macabre dance. Lebo. Lebo and Ntsimane.

There was a knock on the door. All at once the images disappeared. I was in control again.

I flushed the toilet, unlocked the door and with eyes looking straight ahead, I walked back to my office. I opened the window to Gaborone city then I sank into my soft, leather, executive's chair: blaring taxi horns, children laughing, a wedding procession, a black hearse going the opposite way. I pulled the window shut and turned back to the desk. My in-tray was overflowing.



It was 7:00 pm when I reached home. I turned on the TV just in time for the news headlines. “Petrol prices will go up again at midnight... The AIDS conference was officially opened by...” I switched off the TV and went into the kitchen. The fridge was empty. I got back into the car and drove to Riverwalk Mall to get something to eat.

I was getting out of the car when I saw Ntsimane’s best friend, Charles.

“I didn’t see you at the funeral,” he said.

“I was away.”

“Such a shame.”

“Eish. A shame,” I echoed.

I watched him walk away with a nubile young thing clinging to his arm and wondered if they used condoms. He had been best man at my wedding, Lebo, my maid of honour.

Now Lebo had died of “a short illness,” Botswana’s colloquialism for AIDS. Whilst youngsters gyrate to the sounds of “Make an impression. Use Lover’s Plus condoms every time” on the local TV station, their parents speak of AIDS in hushed tones. You recognise its symptoms in others – they bear the shame. People swear they do not have it but have never taken the test. It is a disease that binds guilty and innocent alike, inextricably. It bound me to Ntsimane and Lebo.

Lebo, beautiful Lebo. Her skin was brown, coffee-with-lots-of-milk brown. Her gazelle eyes held mystery. Her mouth was small and her full lips promised passion. She wore her pitch-black hair in thick, shoulder length twists, way before having dreads was “making a statement”. Her hips were wide, perfect for childbearing. An ample, firm behind balanced below a tiny waist. It was rumoured that a blend of European and African blood flowed through her veins.

When Lebo sashayed into a room she cast a shadow over all other women. You pulled your man closer when Lebo was near. “Lebo was not marriageable,” the men said. She was far too beautiful – too much work. But they desired her, for she lit an inferno in their loins. She stoked that fire with a half-formed smile that drew them to her; they chased her, unaware they were prey pursuing a predator. When she discarded them, they returned home, bedraggled, worn-out and weary. They asked for forgiveness from their real women and spoke of Lebo disparagingly – said she was cheap. “You will bear my children,” the men said, and the real women purred.

Lebo had seemed unwell the last time I saw her. Her skin had a grey pallor and tiny lines etched a grid on her dry cheeks. Fuchsia pink stained the inside of her lips and gums. Her curves had been whittled away leaving boyish hips. The magnificent dreads had been lopped off. In their place was a short, wispy brush cut. When I greeted Lebo, she had started to say “dumela” back but coughed before she got to the second syllable. It was a wracking,

body-shuddering cough. It was the type that extricates the most stubborn phlegm from its sanctuary and draws blood in the process. I had wanted to make Lebo feel less embarrassed so I had also coughed. I remember thinking that coughing must be contagious, like yawning. From that day, I lived in fear.

Whenever Lebo's name was mentioned, the fear would rise a little. When I heard that a gentleman friend of Lebo's had died, the fear changed to dejection. Then Ntsimane started to get sick. Neither one of us gave the illness a name. It was enough to know he knew I knew and I knew he knew.

My Ntsimane. He was mine and Lebo's. He left me for Lebo then returned when she tired of him. I loved Ntsimane so much that I knew my love would expunge Lebo forever from his heart. I survived seven years of marriage by looking the other way when Ntsimane's gaze settled too long on a pretty face. I chose not to hear him whispering into unknown ears on his phone. All I heard was the rustle of Ntsimane's trousers and shirt falling into a crumpled heap on the carpet as I opened my arms to him.

When Ntsimane said he wasn't feeling too good, my fear bubbled over, like homemade beer did when you added yeast to the brew. His health became a barometer of my own. I went to church on Wednesdays and Sundays and beseeched God to forgive him, to forgive us, but one day he whispered: "Baby, I'm so tired. I need to rest." His last words to me were: "I'm sorry. Forgive me."

News of Ntsimane's death spread faster than a veld fire. Fanned by August winds, it leapt from lips to ears. "The virus" or "four letters," they whispered. I told whoever asked that my loving husband died of cancer.

I shaved my head, like a good wife does; sheathed in black from head to toe, I mourned my husband for a year. On the day I shed the black clothes, I ended my vigil.



As I wait for my test results, Ntsimane's favourite hymn sings in my head, "It is well. It is well. It is well with my soul."

Coloured Locks

AUGUST, THE windy month, is seven days old. As many nights have passed since I have been back in my mother's home.

I open my eyes to sounds of early morning in the village and get out of bed to stand at the bedroom window. A woman sweeps the ground with one hand; she rests her other arm across her back and bends at the waist as she moves in a straight line from one end of the yard to the other. I shake my head at the futility of her efforts.

Even as she sweeps, the breeze plucks yellow leaves off the *mosalaosi* tree and scatters them on the ground. They turn cartwheels across the just-swept yard. A white plastic bag leapfrogs after them and is trapped in the corner of the house where the veranda begins.

It is as if God holds a giant sieve over the village, swirls it round and round, sprinkling dust everywhere. Dust filters through the fly-screens and carpets the floors. It coats our shoes and clings to our hair like chalk on a teacher's hands.

I walk to the veranda and settle into my mother's favourite chair.

When I was a young girl, it was my duty to sweep the floor everyday. Once a week I mopped it, then got down on my knees to make it shine with polish red as ox blood and a brush. My mother would inspect my handiwork as I scrubbed. With her hands on her hips and a long sigh she'd point out patches of unevenness.

"Look at that spot, Sethunya, there, behind your foot. What kind of a woman will you become if you can't even keep a floor clean?" she used to ask.

She always wore one of her homemade ankle-length *leteisi* dresses. My favourite had a collar edged with white lace and large pockets on either hip. In one of them she stored the pantry keys, which jangled like a cowbell when she walked. In the other she kept a cloth for polishing any piece of furniture she thought needed shining.

The last time I visited, I found her sitting on the porch, sipping bush tea from the "Best Granny" mug my daughter had given her. It struck me then that she had grown old. I watched her pull herself up from the chair. She paused midway, as if to steel herself, and the crease between her eyebrows deepened. Then she shuffled until she was upright and waved away the cane I held out to her.

She had rejected the hearing aid the doctor said she needed.

"That thing makes my ears go ting-ting-ting like raindrops on a rain water tank."

I wondered about that sometimes. I think she simply chose what she wanted to hear.

My mother raised me on a cocktail of ancestors, tradition and God. Not for her these ideas of the new generation of Batswana who raised children by planting them in foreign soil. A month before my daughter was born, and despite all my protestations, my mother arrived on my doorstep in Gaborone to ensure I followed the rules for caring for a new-born. The doctor had said the baby was in breech. My mother fetched a woman who massaged my stomach every day and guided the baby's head the right way round.

She kept me out of the kitchen for three months after April was born and cooked all my meals.

"You must eat. That is the only way you will produce enough milk for the baby."

She stood sentry at my bedroom door, banning all visitors.

"You just never know what ailments people harbour. They will see her after she is officially introduced to the world. Let us do things the right way, my child," she said.

Years later, when April was a teenager and got so ill I was afraid she would die, my mother nursed her back to health and cursed the alien foods I fed her, in particular rice.

My mother towered over most women, and stood as tall as many men in the small village. She always covered her head, but last night, when I went to the mortuary to

prepare her body for burial, she was without a *doek* on her head. I traced the lines of her face and stroked her hair.

Her hair was black, with threads of grey, and parted into four blocks. Each block was braided and the plait tucked in and hidden away. I ran my fingers over her hair and it felt soft. Somehow I had thought it would be hard and brittle like her hands that refused to bend when I held them in mine. I took out the scarf that I had fished from the trunk in which she stored all her treasures. I had found it tucked between the sheets of tissue paper that it had come wrapped in. It was the rainbow-coloured silk one 24-year old April had bought for her grandmother with her first pay cheque.

I folded the scarf into a triangle, wrapped it over her head and tied it into a knot at the base of her neck. My mother had said she would only wear it on special occasions.

Now I close my eyes and can see her ululating and waving the scarf above her head, this way and that as she danced and sang praises to her granddaughter. When I open my eyes, the woman is sweeping the front of the yard. I see my footprints on the dusty stoep. I get up from the chair. My mother's house is waiting to be cleaned.



It is the morning after my mother's funeral. Sitting on the bed, I study my daughter's sleeping face. She curves her body the way I do when I sleep and draws her knees up close to her chest. She stretches her legs and her eyes flutter open as if to look at me, but then she closes them again.

I hope she dreams in colour. Pink, like the hydrangeas that grow as large as my fists in pots on the veranda. Or maybe her dreams are orange like the golden shower vine that twists one way and then the other as it creeps up the wooden fence.

She turns towards me and I stretch my hand out to push back a strand of hair from her brow. Her hair used to be black, with tight coils, but her tresses are the colour of mulberry now, from a bottle, with ends that lie flat and lifeless, without a hint of curl remaining. Last month it was the colour of sand.

She shifts again. I think she says "grandmother." I look at her face but her eyelids are pressed tightly together.

My daughter dreams in English, a language I list as my third. She learnt it at the private schools I sent her to, and I forced her to speak it all the time, just like they did at those schools.

"Children are only to speak *that* language during the Setswana period," the teacher warned.

I wanted my daughter to have a life different, no, better, than mine. I sent her there so she would one day travel to faraway places that I had only seen in books. It pleases me that she lives like rich people do in my country. When she

speaks, she flicks her head back and tucks her hair behind her ear with her finger.

But it saddens me that she has forgotten who she is, rejected our ways. I thought she would learn Western ways but keep her own, and set them together side by side like the knife and fork with which she always ate.

During her grandmother's funeral, she tripped over Setswana words as she tried to read the messages of condolence. Her nasal "robala ka kagiso," rest in peace, must have turned my mother in her grave for sure.

My cheeks stung and the blood rushed to my face as the crowd growled their disapproval. I could almost hear them asking what nonsense is this? A Motswana child who cannot speak Setswana? What is this? I felt the heat of shame on my fingertips as I pulled the veil over my eyes. My daughter has boxed and buried her mother tongue so deep, when she finds Setswana words they have English hues. I never wished it to be this way.

When I was a little girl, I had short black hair with small tight curls. Just as soon as you stretched them out with a comb, they snapped back into place like tiny springs. I wished for wavy tresses, blonde, that swayed to the rhythm of my movements. I yearned for hair like that of the girls who lived in the big houses that my mother cleaned.

My hair never had a chance to grow long. Every last Saturday of the month, my mother took me to a man who ran an open-air barbershop-cum-shoe-maker operation at the Gaborone train station.

We would walk to the bus stop to board the bus to Gaborone. My mother walked fast and I would have to run a little to keep up. When we arrived at the barber, Mama would hand him a bottle of purple methylated spirits and leave him with a warning too.

“Make sure you soak the clippers before you touch my daughter’s hair. I don’t want her getting ringworm from dirty blades.”

As Mama watched, I would climb onto the black chair whose threadbare seat cover flapped over its sides like banana peels. I would take care not to wriggle, lest the edge of the material cut my thighs. Then trying not to blink, I would watch Mama’s *doek* bobbing up the road as she walked to the supermarket behind the big busses that refuelled at the garage.

The man would mow my hair flat, with clippers that creaked as he worked them like a pair of scissors. He would wedge my head against his football-sized stomach and tilt it to the left, to the right, down and up with gnarled hands that looked like the *mophane* worms he chewed and spat out as he cut.

I would watch tufts of my hair tumble onto the circle of newspapers that covered the ground around the chair I sat in. When he finished, he would offer me an orange that was so big, I had to hold it in both hands. I would roll it under my foot and sit under the *morula* tree sucking out the juice till Mama came back. As we would leave, the barber would rummage around in his apron and pull out a lollipop – always red, with pink chewing gum inside. He

would press it into my hand and warn me to eat it only after I had had my evening meal.

Sometimes I would beg my mother: “Please, please Mama, can’t I stretch my hair instead?”

But her response was always the same: “Give thanks for what God blessed you with, my girl. If God wanted your hair straight, he would have made it straight. You cannot change who you are. How will you balance a bucket of water on your head?”

When we got home, Mama would lather my head with red soap that smelt like the barber’s hands and glaze my scalp with Vaseline, leaving it shining like a mirror. In winter she put on two layers, as though to cold-proof my head. Warm tears would stream down my face when I looked into the mirror and traced the bumps that criss-crossed my scalp. I wished I wouldn’t cry, but already I could hear the song the boys would sing at school. They would be waiting for me, chanting:

Chiskop, tamati,

Lerago la mmisis

Chiskop, tamati,

Lerago la mmisis

“Baldhead like a tomato, smooth as a madam’s bum.”

Leaving home to attend boarding school, I flung open the gates to life unbounded by Mama and visits to the barber. Every Friday my friends and I sat on the braiding rock, where we took turns to style each other’s hair. When I was in form one, the fashion was “strop”. We created a rope with hair and black wool and made it go in circles

around our heads. In form two, our American teacher – who wore colourful caftans and beaded earrings – taught us to plait our hair into tiny lines that made our heads look like rows of corn on a cob. In form three, we saved up to lengthen our hair with extensions, bought from the Ghanaian factory that supplied the hair salons that were springing up like mushrooms all over the country. The next year, in form four, I kept my hair natural, but washed it with green soap and didn't rinse out the lather. "Cold stretching," we called it. On Saturdays I would comb out the hair into a giant afro. In my last year at secondary school, we jerry-curled our locks and left our pillows as greasy as the overall of the man who taught us mechanics.



I am still trying to remember all the other hairstyles when someone knocks on the door and calls out, "Mma Lorato." It is only when the door opens and my aunt sticks her head through that I realise she is calling me, mother of Lorato, Lorato being the name given to my daughter by my mother.

"Mma Lorato, we need sugar – from the storeroom," she whispers.

"Coming," I respond, and I pat my hip. I get up to leave the bedroom and April opens her eyes.

“Those keys, Mama, jangling like that... for a minute I thought you were grandmother.”

“Wake up April. It is time for you to get up now. Remember this is not Gaborone city. And cover that head when you leave the room.”

As I stand up, I wonder if she has been awake all along. She has a lazy streak, an air of entitlement that irks me, but she is my creation.

She used to come home crying when she was a little girl. She said she wanted to be like Rapunzel, then Barbie, and I offered her nothing in their place.

From the time we arrived in my mother's home, I had hovered around my daughter like a hen waiting for its eggs to hatch. I reminded her to hold out both hands and say clearly “Dumelang bo mma le bo rra,” instead of the slurred “melang” she offered as greeting; I had examined her cooking efforts, crushed the lumps in her just-cooked porridge and got down on my knees to clean again the floor she said she had mopped. All the time I wondered what kind of a woman my daughter was becoming. My worry deepened as evening approached.



It is time for our hair to be cut as tradition demands. My aunt starts with mine, with a pair of clippers that shave my hair off in strips and groan as they plough through

my plaits. Behind my eyes, the stinging starts, but I press my eyes closed with my fingers. I feel like I am a little girl again. I am angry with my mother as I perch on a chair whose insides show. I am blinking and blinking so the tears do not leave my eyes, but they still slip through my eyelids. So I try instead to string together happy memories of my childhood.

I have been gone so long from my mother's home. I have forgotten that it is a place where life was measured by the slant of shadows created by the sun; where morning began when a cock called out for morning to take the place of night. Home was a place where Mama woke me up every morning with "Wake up, wake up. The sun does not find a girl in bed," until one day I woke up before her and she hugged me and said, "That's my girl."

I have forgotten that after fetching water and cleaning the stoep, I would find Mama's slices of freshly baked bread and home-made *morula* jam waiting for me on the table. I would gobble it up and wash it down with a cup of bush tea made on the Primus stove. In winter, Mama would warm a stone and give it to me to hold in my hands as I walked to school.

I loved it when schools closed. All the children in our neighbourhood gathered in our yard to play barefoot in the sun. We skipped rope fashioned out of a creeper that weaved in and out of the fence. Other times we played *diketo*, with pebbles, or *dibeke*, using a ball made out of Mama's old stockings. When night and day traded places, we would huddle around a bonfire and listen to Mama tell

us our own fables, the kind that began, “Gatwe erile,” our “Once, long ago...”

I rejected that life as I grew older. I grew up wishing for another life, and always another mother. I wonder now if a person could cling on to sadness so tightly that it bleached even the brightest colours.

When I open my eyes, I am surprised to see April sitting beside me. “No,” I say. “She’s not cutting her hair.”

April looks at me and shakes her head. Then another woman gets up with a pair of scissors. She chops off April’s fake hair first. Then she takes out a razor blade and starts at the top of her forehead. With tiny flicks of her wrist she shaves off the brown hair. I watch as it falls in little clumps onto the towel they put across her shoulders. Some of it lands on the floor.



Two weeks have passed since we laid my mother to rest. Every morning I stand in front of the mirror and re-discover my face. We stand together, my daughter and me, matching heads clean-shaven and smooth. Soon it will be time to return to the city where neighbours share a tarred road home and not much else.

“Maybe you can buy a wig when you get home,” I say. She looks into my eyes, her eyes so like mine, so like my mother’s. She smiles.

“No Mama, I think I could get used to this.” I see new hair sprouting, like tiny shoots of grass after summer rains. I run my palm over my head and smile too.

I like the feel of the August breeze on my head.

Blood of Mine

No, SETHUNYA thought, this is not how her life was meant to be.

She was educated, with multiple degrees. She gave up a blossoming career to be a home-maker. But in the society in which she lived, in which a woman's worth was measured in terms of her marital status and the number of children she bore, Sethunya's score was middling to low. Granted, she married young, for love, but she struggled to conceive. In the end she had only one child, where four would have been more respectable.

She was married only one year when her in-laws began to remark, when she was in hearing range, about the foolhardiness of Ntsimane, her husband. Served him right, they said, marrying a woman and paying *bogadi* without guarantee that she was fertile.

The snide remarks bounced off Ntsimane's huge frame. He was a towering figure of a man, with a baritone voice to match. When he spoke, it was as though he had a microphone in his throat. He liked to boast that he was as strong and virile as the Brahman bulls he bred. No one

ever thought to question that Ntsimane was fertile; he himself least of all.

One day, during the early days of her marriage, Sethunya heard her mother-in-law's footsteps approaching. She wondered whether or not to hide, but it was too late.

"Mma Ntsimane, Dumela! How lovely to see you!" but Sethunya's heart sank as she opened the door to her mother-in-law.

"I was in the dress shop down the road, I thought I should come and see how you are looking after my son." She raised an eyebrow and inspected her daughter-in-law from head to toe, her gaze lingering at Sethunya's midriff.

"Tea, mme?"

"Tanki, ngwetsi yame."

Mma Ntsimane shouldered the younger woman out of the way and strode into the kitchen, swinging her child bearing belly and heavy breasts triumphantly before Sethunya.

Sethunya's face flushed hot, and tears stung her eyes as she filled the kettle.

Her mother-in-law's words speared her heart, spoken as they were in her shrill voice.

Sethunya thought of her own mother, who always said a good woman was virtuous, kept her own counsel and, by so doing, kept her name out of peoples' mouths.

Sethunya had been raised in prayer and she trusted in the Good Lord. Every morning when she rose, she thanked God for giving her a fine husband, for the bread on their table and for her good health. She asked Him

to help her grow to love her nagging mother-in-law but, most of all, she asked Him to bless her with a child. And she knew He would answer her prayers, of that she was sure.

But as the months went by and she still did not fall pregnant, desperation sometimes grabbed hold of her and wrested her faith away. She felt incomplete without a child. And lonely.

Ntsimane, however, was engrossed in a never-ending quest to find the perfect bull to mate with his cows and swell his herds. Sometimes when Sethunya felt the time was right, when she knew that all she needed was his seed, he would not be there and so another month would go by. And then another, until the months became years.

As the years dragged by, Sethunya struggled to keep her mind occupied, but sometimes she just got tired and her resolve to be positive waned.

She tried white medicine. She sat patiently in the stark, sterile waiting rooms of different gynaecologists and obstetricians, sandwiched by women in various stages of pregnancy. Hers was the only plank-flat abdomen. She knew the regimen. Fill the clear plastic bottle with urine. Check blood pressure, weight, temperature. Wait. Strip. Don't tense when the ice-cold metal instrument is pushed deep inside and probing fingers searched to find the reason for her barrenness.

"There is nothing wrong with you," they all said. The last one said: "You are strong as a horse. Just keep trying – and enjoy it."

She thought she must have imagined the wink-wink that accompanied the last rejoinder. She reported back to Ntsimane and suggested that maybe, maybe he should be tested. A sperm count, something, just to make sure.

“No,” he barked.

Perhaps his mother and aunts were right, he thought. He should have married a simple woman, one who knew how to make babies.

Sethunya tried traditional medicine too, though she told no one. She sat on the ground on the skin of a goat which still had the shape of the animal from which it came. The traditional healer scattered the bones from his pouch in the sand and declared that he saw a son in her future. He brewed a bitter tasting concoction from leaves he ground together and instructed her to inhale the vapour as she sipped the hot liquid. Within three months she would be pregnant. For this prognosis, she paid a goat. She returned to the loneliness of her home in the belief that it would happen – soon.

During these times she had plenty of time to fret, alone at home, with nothing to keep her busy save her thoughts. She shunned the company of the young women in her neighbourhood who seemed to taunt her with their protruding stomachs. When Ntsimane came home, she sensed impatience in him. She spoke to God less often and sometimes just sat idle. An idle mind was fertile ground for the Devil.

One Saturday, when she was alone in the house, Ntsimane having left soundlessly that morning, there was a knock on the door.

“Tsena, come in.”

It was Botshelo. She remembered then her husband saying that Botshelo would come and collect some of the sour milk Ntsimane had brought for him from the cattle post. She was happy for the company and they conversed over a cup of bush tea. They spoke about the drought, the potholes, elections. When they finished, he followed her out into the little house that served as both kitchen and storeroom. As she opened the door, she felt his warm breath on her neck.

And then he took her in his arms and held her close. She shook her head but he held her tighter. When he kissed her, Sethunya felt a stirring in her soul. When he cupped her breast with one hand and foraged inside her skirt with the other, she made as though to say “no”, but her body seemed to belong to someone else. She closed her eyes and imagined it was Ntsimane. She felt her heart beating wildly, in time with Botshelo’s. When it was over, he held her close.

“I love you Sethunya,” he breathed. And those words made it all right.

“You must go.” She handed him the enamel bucket with the sour milk and he left.

That evening, when she heard the roar of the diesel engine as Ntsimane returned, she went straight to him and opened her arms to him. She could smell the faint smell

of cow-dung on his khaki overalls and his leather hat. So she peeled them off as she led him into the bedroom. She opened her arms and legs to him and they made love with an intensity that surprised her. And when it ended, she was sure Ntsimane had flushed all traces of Botshelo from her.

Two months later, after a bowl of *bogobe*, she felt her insides churning. She figured it was the sour porridge which lately had seemed to emit an overpowering, rancid smell that clogged her nose. But she thought nothing of it. In fact, it was only when her mother-in-law, whose cloying perfume seemed stronger than usual, commented on the size of her breasts that Sethunya suspected she might be pregnant.

The home pregnancy test confirmed her suspicions. After six long years, Sethunya was pregnant. Her mother said it was a miracle.

“Ntsimane, we are going to have a baby. I’m pregnant.”

“Are you sure, Sethunya?”

“I’m sure. The doctor confirmed it this morning.”

That night, husband and wife slept with legs entwined like the branches of the vine that crept up their bedroom wall. But Sethunya slept fitfully. Dreams of Ntsimane and Botshelo made her sit bolt upright in the middle of the night. She disentangled her legs from Ntsimane’s, afraid that he might hear her heart beating as though it would burst through her ribs.

She was grateful she was pregnant. “I’m pregnant” saved her having to explain the niggling feeling that would

not let go of her. Sethunya devoured all the baby books in the library, stocked her house with *Living and Loving*, *Baby and You*, and all other how-to-be-a-wonderful-mother magazines.

The excitement that filled the house was infectious. Ntsimane came home more often now, and stayed longer. When she felt the baby's first kicks at four months, he was there. He shared her excitement when she felt a hard mass pressing against her side. Was it his head, or elbow, a knee, they wondered together. She attributed the niggling feeling to the pregnancy. She told herself it was heartburn. The feeling would disappear when the baby was born. When the first pains of labour came, Ntsimane was there to drive her to the hospital.

It was a natural delivery, no complications. "A beautiful baby boy," the midwife pronounced as she placed the baby in his mother's arms.

At once, the pains of labour were erased by the wave of love she felt as she held her son in her arms and he started to suck on her breast. She looked into his eyes and in that moment she knew that he was her child. But just as soon as the nurse took him away, so the niggling resumed in the pit of her stomach. She scoured the baby's face for signs of Ntsimane, but there were none. And so she fashioned them herself and her uneasiness was stilled. When Ntsimane walked into the labour room, she was ready.

"He has your nose," she declared with finality and held the baby out for Ntsimane to hold.

“He does?”

“He does. And those are your ears.”

They named their son Thapelo, which meant “prayer”. He had his father’s nose and maybe his ears too. Even if the father didn’t see it, she did.

As was customary, the proud parents inherited the name of their first-born child. They became known as Mma Thapelo and Rra Thapelo, Mother and Father of Thapelo.

Tradition also dictated that baby and mother stayed indoors for 3 months. So, just as soon as she was discharged from the hospital, she was whisked away to the familiarity of the home in which she was raised. Sequestered in her parents’ home, she was granted a temporary reprieve. Only close relatives were allowed to view the child. After three months, there would be a big celebration as the baby was officially introduced to the rest of the world. Then there would be no more hiding from prying eyes.

“Who does he look like?” the relatives asked over and over again. “Does he look like his father?”

Sethunya bristled every time she heard that question. Who he looked like was inconsequential. She had a son, finally. She and Ntsimane had a son. That was all that mattered.

On the morning of the celebration, Sethunya woke up with a resounding headache. The feeling of unease seemed to grow heavier throughout the day, until it felt as though it were lodged permanently in the pit of her stomach. It got so heavy sometimes that even her mother’s tried

and tested remedy of Milk of Magnesia failed to dispel it. But somehow she made it through the day. By the time everyone had left and she was on her way to her home with Ntsimane, she felt normal again.

But the relief was fleeting. The next day it was back.

So she strapped Thapelo on her back and swept her yard. When the feeling failed to yield, she took down the curtains, room by room, and washed them. By the time she had dried, pressed and re-hung them, the feeling had disappeared.

When Thapelo started to walk, the fear in her was reawakened. Her own legs were straight as the wooden pestles she used to pound the millet grains into powder for *bogobe*. Rra Thapelo's feet faced outwards when he walked. But Thapelo was bow-legged. As she watched him cling onto whatever he could and draw his little body upright, she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. The feeling rose inside her and voices screamed in her head and she shook her head clear of the images that played in her head. Machinations of a guilty mind.

Sethunya was never ever really free of worry. She thanked the Lord for her son and prayed especially loudly when she got to the part about being forgiven her trespasses. She needn't have worried so. Thapelo's legs straightened out. Everyone said he was going to be tall, taller maybe than his father. Rra Thapelo was glad about that. Any son of his had to be tall and strong, like him.

One evening, earlier than usual, when Thapelo had taken his first steps, Sethunya heard the roar of Rra Thapelo's

van as he careened into the yard. He had said that he was going to arrive home early so he could play with Thapelo before he fell asleep. But he was too late. Thapelo was already asleep, with his tiny mouth slightly open and his left leg curled under his body. Rra Thapelo stood quietly, unmoving, watching his son sleep. Something inside him made him want to straighten Thapelo's little legs and turn him on his back so that he slept like him. But he didn't touch him. Instead, he pulled the little stool out from under the study table he had bought when Thapelo was born and perched on top of it as he continued to examine his son.

There had been talk. There was always talk when a child did not look like his father. Whispers, like the sound of the dry grass brushed by a cool summer breeze. It irked him sometimes that Thapelo did not look more like him. And when he sat around the fire with other men in the village and one of them glibly said "Ngwana o itsiwe sereto ke mmaagwe," he felt a lump rise in his throat but which he flushed down with a few swigs of beer. Sometimes he needed more than a few to drown out the doubts that gnawed at him. But by the time he had had enough, his confidence was restored. He was a strong African man from whose loins sprung strong African sons, just like his bulls.

He picked his son up and lay down on the bed with him. He put Thapelo on top of his chest and he could feel his warm baby breath on his skin. It tickled a little. Thapelo smelt like baby lotion. He loved that smell.

Ntsimane had big plans for his boy. He was going to provide for his son and his son's mother like a real man was supposed to. Thapelo would be a policeman or a soldier. Or a football star. He could just see him, 2010, a striker on the Botswana national team.

Mma Thapelo lay on her side of the bed, unmoving, pretending to be asleep but watching Rra Thapelo. Thapelo stirred and changed positions. He was fast asleep, on his knees, with his bum in the air. Rra Thapelo smiled. He remembered the first time he had seen him sleeping like that. He had been so worried. But Mma Thapelo had calmed him down.

"He is comfortable. All babies sleep like that," she had reassured him.

It was strange how Mma Thapelo had become an expert on all matters of childrearing. When he commented about his son's legs, his wife was always quick to tell him how their son's legs were like his own, or like her brother's brother's, or uncle's sister's brother's. It made him wonder sometimes. Some people said the baby looked exactly like him. He didn't really see the resemblance, but whenever someone said so, he acknowledged the likeness.

"Yes, this is my boy," he would say and he would pull his stomach in just a little and push his chest out, just a little.

He remembered the day he had brought mother and child home from the hospital. The day before they were discharged, he had gone to the mall and spent the whole afternoon looking for a carrycot. He finally found the

perfect one just before the shops closed. The friendly lady at the shop had helped him choose it.

“It’s for my son,” he had told her, “my first born.”



And now Thapelo, his son, was nineteen. He had grown tall and strong and was doing well at University. Ntsimane’s only complaint was that he did not come home as much as he would have liked. His son didn’t spend enough time at the cattle post.

But Thapelo was on his way for such a rare visit. He had phoned earlier the previous afternoon to say that he would be coming home the next day.

Mma Thapelo could hardly sleep. She was like a child on the eve of its birthday, anxious for the sun to rise. Over the years it had become easier to believe that Rra Thapelo was Thapelo’s father. But there it was, that worry whose origins she did not understand.

She busied herself with getting the house ready and a meal cooked for when Thapelo arrived. She was sweeping the yard, deep in thought, when the phone rang. She raced into the house. It was probably Thapelo calling to ask if she needed anything from the shops.

“Hello.”

“Dumela mma. Is that the mother of Thapelo Malatsi?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Mma, I am calling from Princess Marina Hospital. Your son was involved in a car accident early this morning along the Gaborone-Francistown road. He hit a cow. You need to come to the hospital at once. You and his father.”

Mma Thapelo put down the phone. Her hands were shaking. She needed to get hold of Rra Thapelo. But there was no telephone at the cattle post and he could be anywhere. He had left early in the morning with the herd boy to go and find a missing cow. She had to go to the hospital.

She was just getting into the taxi when Rra Thapelo arrived. He had aged visibly since that morning.

“Mma Thapelo, we found the cow. It is the one that Thapelo hit.”

Mma Thapelo did not know what to say. She wanted to scream and shout at him. She wanted to tell him how much she hated those cows of his, how she had hated them all her life, but instead she just cried. They drove in silence to the hospital.

The doctor looked across at them with sad, sorry eyes.

“We need to give your son more blood, but he has a rare blood type. We will need to test your blood and Rra Thapelo’s. You are probably the most likely donors.”

Mma Thapelo was grateful she was sitting down. Blood tests? She prayed that her blood would match Thapelo’s. But behind her eyes a drummer began his drumbeat. He started slowly at first, and then faster and louder until she felt as though her head would explode.

Mma Thapelo looked at the doctor. The words tumbled out his mouth too fast for her to understand what he was saying. Fear filled her bladder. She stood up to go to the toilet. When she got back, Rra Thapelo was already folding down the sleeve of his shirt. Mma Thapelo felt like she was careening down the side of a hill, without brakes.

“You next, Mma Thapelo. Don’t worry. It’s just a little prick.”

Mma Thapelo hardly heard as she stretched her arm out. She looked the other way when the needle pricked her arm.



“We have not found a match. In fact, the preliminary results indicate that Thapelo cannot be your son.”

Thapelo cannot be your son. Thapelo cannot be your son. The words rang over and over in her head. She tried to search out Rra Thapelo’s eyes but he seemed to be looking at a spot above the picture in the doctor’s office. He had not said a word since they entered the doctor’s rooms.

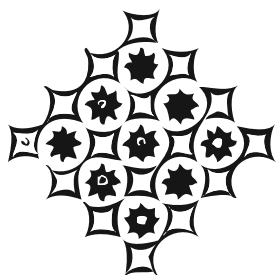
“I am sorry,” the voice continued. “We did everything we could to save him. We lost him this morning.”

Botshelo was dead. And now her son, her only son, was dead too. His parents killed him. His father’s beast

and his mother. When he needed his mother to give her blood to keep him alive, she could not, neither could his father.

The silence that descended upon their household strangled all the voices that used to sing in her head. At her son's funeral, Mma Thapelo had wanted to cry, but she had no tears. They flowed into a reservoir which she had built over the years, into which she had bottled her fears. They buried their son together. Rra Thapelo stood next to her with his head bowed. Since the day the doctor had said the blood tests showed that Thapelo could not be his son, Rra Thapelo had aged. It was as though the weight that Mma Thapelo had carried all these years had shifted to his shoulders and was weighing him down. His son was dead, but he had never had a son. Would never have a son.

No, this was not how things were meant to be.



Empty-Handed

THE SUN was a fiery ball rising, painting the sky morning, when the hunters began their trek. As they walked through tough, sun-bleached grass, it pricked their calves and blood trickled red to their ankles, but they didn't stop. They trod lightly, wary that the man-eater could be close by, swallowed by straw-coloured bush. Around his neck, Mosweu wore his son's beads, a talisman. He ran his fingers over them, as if to invoke the forgiveness of his ancestors.



He had cycled home from the market the night before, minus the chicken he'd promised for his family's supper. Even before arriving home, he could already feel his wife's eyes stinging him. "Useless. Good-for-nothing."

As he neared his kraal, he thought he heard a sound: a rustling of leaves, a flutter of bird wings. Dismounting

his bicycle, he tipped his head to one side, listening, but he heard only his heart pounding.

A month before, a lion had entered the village, killing a bull. The villagers had been terrified. They had demanded the beast be hunted down and shot, but at the *kgotla* meeting, the game ranger had decreed that no wildlife would be killed.

“It’s the drought that has chased these animals to the village. When the rains come they’ll return to the bush,” he had said.

Afterwards, the government had dried the bull owner’s tears with a wad of money that swelled his pockets and made Mosweu’s eyes bulge.



The memory surfaced as Mosweu stood by his kraal. Slowly, he swung the gate open. His prize ram, Molemo, scurried away but Mosweu called to him softly and the goat obeyed. Quickly, Mosweu tethered it to a tree and pedalled home.

He found his wife behind their hut, crouched over a three-legged cast iron pot, boiling water for the chicken he’d promised. She looked up expectantly. Shamed, he turned away.

After the meatless meal, he sat in silence as night set in, watching his son reading in the fading light. Mosweu

dreamed of better days. With the money the government would pay him, Thabo would study indoors, by electric light, and they would eat chicken every day. Lost in thought, he did not see his son leave. When he looked up, Thabo was gone.

“Thabo!”

Silence.

“Mma Thabo, where is he?”

From the hut, his wife shouted, “Watering your goat like you said he should.”

“No! I told him I’d do that in the morning.”

“Or maybe he’s gone to his grandmother’s.” She paused. “There they eat meat every day.”

But Mosweu was no longer listening. In the distance, he caught the sound of a goat bleating, Thabo’s cry, then silence.

He bolted into the hut to fetch his gun, a torch, and then he raced to his kraal.

“Help,” he shouted into the night. “Help me please!”

Mosweu’s neighbours came pouring from their homes, waving sticks, feet pounding, yelling. As he rounded the corner to his kraal, Mosweu saw blood staining the ground, Molemo bleating wildly, still tethered. His heart pounded, pumped by adrenalin whose seed he knew.

“Thabo,” he called. “Please God. No!”



The sun was setting when Mosweu returned, weary and without his son. He passed by his kraal and stared at the goat.

Later, he would slaughter it for his son's funeral, but now he had to face his wife. As he approached, she ran to him, but then she spotted her son's bloodied shirt. She snatched it out of his hands and sank to her knees, crying like she would never stop.

Marang, Mother of Keineetse

IN SETSWANA, we say a person's name is a mould into which his life is cast. In Boitumelo, joy abounds, Bontle will bring beauty, Keineetse submission. Before I had my son, I was called Marang. My father said he named me for the sunlight that warmed his heart on the day I was born.

When others cried "It's too hot" as the Botswana sun baked the earth, I lay on my back, on a straw mat under the *mophane* tree, feeling the sun touch my skin. I squinted through the branches and listened to the wind whispering my future into my ears. It told me one day I would travel the world, chasing the sun. Whenever I told my father about my tomorrows, he hoisted me onto his shoulders and I felt like I could touch the sky.

I was nine when Papa went away on a cold June Monday morning. A woman I had never seen before fetched me from school. She said she was my father's sister, and that I should call her Rakgadi. I sat in the front seat of her car and as we drove home, she squeezed my hand whenever we stopped.

We arrived to find some men pitching a green tent. Others were huddled over a fire in the backyard. Clusters of women were scattered around the yard, washing teacups, kneading dough.

Inside the house, Mama was wrapped in black from head to toe, a cocoon. She lay on her stomach, on a mattress on her bedroom floor. Weeping women surrounded her. Their dark, long clothes matched their expressions. I watched Rakgadi strip the living room of its curtains and smear the windows with ashes just like they did when my grandfather went to heaven.

Rakgadi said Papa had gone to be with Ntatemogolo. Every day that week, people filed in and out of our home wearing sombre faces. Priests came and prayed every evening, then all the people who had come for prayers were fed *bogobe* and meat or tea and *magnwinya*.

On the Friday morning, Rakgadi woke me up early. She said they were going to fetch Papa from the mortuary in the afternoon and he would spend the night at home. I did not understand how Papa could be coming home, but I did not ask.

Papa came home in a coffin. People prayed and sang all night long.

At dawn, the funeral began. I saw Papa's friends put him in a deep, dark hole and fill it with soil. He took Mama's smile with him when he went.

From that day on, Mama would sit in Papa's big chair and talk to him as though he could hear her. People would look at me with sad eyes that mirrored their words. After

days of fearing that my mother would follow my father, my grandmother whisked me away.

“You will stay with me now, my baby. When your mother gets better, she will come and fetch you.”

In my grandmother’s house, I slept alone in a room that smelt of candle wax, paraffin and cow dung. Nkuku didn’t know that she needed to sing me my favourite song so I would sleep through the night. After a while it didn’t matter, because time erased the words from my memory. Time blurred Mama and Papa’s faces too, made them fade into the thatched roof above my bed.

I stayed with Nkuku for a year, then Mama came to take me home. I returned to find a man sitting in my father’s chair. For a moment I thought Papa had come home, but the chair swallowed the man who sat there. His shoulders were narrow and his eyes didn’t smile when they met mine. But he had found Mama’s smile, dug it up, and put it back on her face. I hoped he wouldn’t go away, and that Mama would stay happy forever.

I had been home a year and Mama’s new happiness showed no signs of waning. I was lying under my tree when Mama’s voice plucked me from my travels.

“Marang! Come and make Malome a cup of tea.”

I jumped at the chance to do something to make Malome smile. Ever since he had been visiting us, Mama hummed as she walked around the house and her laugh rose from deep inside her stomach and exploded from her mouth as she threw her head back. The only other person who laughed like that was my older sister, Bontle, and she

was always getting into trouble for it. Mama was always telling her not to laugh like a herd boy.

One night, as I was just entering that space between sleeping and dreaming, a giggle pierced the silent night. I thought it was Bontle. A car door creaked open and closed, and Mama's high heels scraped on the gravel path as she came round the house with Malome, heading for the back door.

I watched the driveway through the window and saw Malome exchanging sips of wine and kisses with my mother. They licked each other's lips like I licked my own when I ate ice cream, and I looked away, troubled by what I had seen. Mama teetered down the pathway in her black high-heels and I heard her slip the key into the keyhole. There was a rustle of cloth followed by a soft cry that sounded like it was made by the kittens that lived under my window.

I had watched Mama get ready to go out that evening. She had minced in front of the mirror, which was so big you could see your whole body in it, twirling, sipping gold liquid from a long stemmed glass. Turn, sip. Turn, sip. She had beautiful hair, thick, and so unlike my dry, tight curls. She had stood in front of the mirror with her legs apart, the way she always said a lady should not stand.

They were in the living room now, and I crept to my half-open door to watch. I saw her stumble into Malome's arms and reach up to embrace him around the neck. He leant down to kiss her and they played their game again. He ran his hands across her back. Up and down, lower.

I crept back into the doorway, embarrassed, no, shamed, by what I had seen. The silence that followed locked away dark secrets.

Mama and Malome. That is what my mother said we should call him, Malome, “Uncle.”

I heard her tell the woman who braided her hair that she wanted him to stay forever. Sometimes Malome brought me sweets and he called me his beautiful princess, like my father used to do. I also wished he would stay with us forever.



Twenty years later, I climb out of the kombi and limp the last kilometre from the stop to my home. My right hip is throbbing again; arthritis they said at the clinic. I press it better with my palm. A hot water bottle and a cup of rooibos tea will numb the pain. I have lived with it since my son's birth – my penitence for having a child out of wedlock.

It is already dark when I reach the gate that Keineetse bought with money from piece jobs at his aunt's hair salon, and I smile. He's such a good boy, my son. I wonder why he hasn't switched the lights on, and quicken my steps.

Something scrapes against the tiles as I push the door open. I slip my hand into the space between the wall and door and switch on the light. Pebbles from the gravel path

sometimes get stuck under the door, but as I force the door open, a piece of glass spins away across the polished floor. Shattered glass is sprinkled across the sitting room, creating a mosaic of shards. Perhaps thieves have broken into my house – but the sitting room window is intact, and the small TV is still there, blaring away. The VCR? Yes, still on the TV stand, but my favourite vase lies in a million pieces all over the floor.

“Keineetse!”

He does not answer. A cup of cold tea stands on the side table next to my chair, still full, with a sheen of cream across its surface.

“Keineetse!”

I lean against the door to close it and, picking my way across the pieces of glass, fetch a broom to sweep up my broken vase. I stoop to pick up a big red piece and it pierces my finger. The jagged edge of the fear I have buried deep in my heart spikes red, the colour of the blood that flows from my finger.

On the little table next to the phone there is a scrap of paper with numbers scribbled on it. I recognise the telephone number, and in that moment I know. Keineetse has found his father. I draw myself upright, drop the broom and drop into my chair.

I twist my ring rosary round and round.

“Go tla siama.”

I mouth the words over and over again. All these years it has been all right. But today I am consumed by fear, fear

that I will lose my son, my blood. I fought to keep him, clawed at anyone who said otherwise.

When he was born I called my son Keineetse, “I have surrendered.” And by surrendering, I won. All his life I have kept him safe. I would sooner die than tell him that his father called him a “mistake” he wished he could just rub out. But Keineetse is here, alive, trying to pry his father’s identity from me at every opportunity.

The phone rings. I pick it up, holding my breath, waiting for the person on the line to speak.

“Marang? Are you there?”

My sister has not called me by my given name since my son’s birth.

“Yes. I’m here.”

“He is here with me. He knows his father is alive.”

“Oh.”

“I thought you’d told him.”

With those words, she tramples across the limits I have set everyone; she crosses into space that I have never shared with a soul. And even tonight, I banish her.

“I’m so tired, Bontle. I need to sleep. Good night.”

I hang up the phone without waiting for her response.

I sit in my chair and stare out of the window at the road that leads out of Gaborone, the one Keineetse’s father travelled in search of his son. Keineetse is a man now, no longer that boy I used to hug and kiss and hold to my breast. I smile. In my head I hear his boy’s voice again as we play our game of make-believe. I close my eyes so I can see him more clearly.



“Mama... Mama, tell me about Papa again.”

It’s the game we started playing when my son realised that mothers came with fathers.

“Your father was a big man. Tall and strong.”

I tense my biceps like Popeye the sailor man. He punches my flabby upper arms and giggles when they wobble.

“And he used to bend down when he walked through the door, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” and I smile because Keineetse is stealing my lines.

“Like so Mama?” He slithers off my bed, hunches his shoulders up to his chin and strides out of and back into our bedroom.

“And when he carried me on his shoulders I touched the sky,” he tells me as he waves his chubby fingers in the air and clambers back onto my bed. “How did he speak Mama?”

“Like a lion lived in his throat,” I growl.

“Like this?” He growls back, runs out of breath at the effort and coughs. I rub the cough better.

“But why did God take him Mama?” His voice becomes unsteady and his lower lip trembles.

I can’t find the words to incriminate God so I sit up, pull my son onto my lap and pretend not to see the two little wet patches his tears leave on the duvet cover.

“Horsey, horsey faster,” he urges me, “Go faster like Papa.”

As I bounce him higher on my knee, he throws his head back and gurgles with laughter.

I replay the game in my head, and the memories that claw their way out of my mind settle back where they belong.

Keineetse is too big now for me to bounce him on my knees, or strap him onto my back and sing lullabies as I clean my house. Keineetse the man has owl-like eyes that skirt mine, jabbing at my soul, wanting to weed the truth out from my words. I have told him his father was hit by a train. That is what children are told when fathers have failed to father. I wanted those words to smooth the harsh edges of the truth until a time when the truth would not hurt as much – but the pain has never gone away.



It happened so long ago. It should be less painful now, but I still feel the hurt as though it were happening again.

I wore my best dress for my fourteenth birthday. It was my only dress. I sneaked into Mama’s room and sprayed her perfume behind my ears, the way she did when she went out with Malome.

Mama was working overtime so we would have money for an extra special Christmas. Malome was in the sitting

room watching TV. He flexed his fingers as his eyes followed me around the room. My leg brushed against his as I held out a bowl of water for him to wash his hands with before I brought his food.

I tried pulling my hands away when he tugged me onto his lap and pressed his lips onto mine. I smelt beer on his breath. He squeezed me so hard I couldn't breathe. He picked me up and laid me on the rug in the living room. Waves of heat swept up from the soles of my feet. My nipples tingled as though a wave of cold air had kissed them.

When a boy had once tried touching me like this, I slapped his hands away so hard, my own stung. But on this day my hands did not move. They were splayed across the floor, cuffed by Malome's.

It sounded as though Mama was whispering in my ear.

"Boys are trouble Marang. You must run away from trouble."

But he was not a boy, he was Mama's friend. I called him Malome, "Uncle", and he was not trouble. He brought us food. He had bought me the dress I was wearing.

"My princess," he whispered and I felt the tiny hairs on my neck stand up.

He touched my nose – the nose I pegged to make it more pointed like Mama's. He ran his hands through my hair.

"Virgin hair" the woman at the hair salon called it. "It would look beautiful if it was relaxed," she said when I

went to have it cut. But Mama said if God had wanted it straight, he would have made it straight.

After that day, I stopped lying under the *mophane* tree. The sky darkened when I looked at it. I hid in my bedroom and went to the toilet whenever I thought I felt a twinge in my stomach. Every day I checked, but it didn't come. Instead, my school uniform pulled taut across my breasts and stomach.

And then one day I found Mama standing at the gate, with her hands on her hips, shaking her head. She knew.

"How did this happen Marang? I told you that boys were trouble. Didn't I warn you?"

I looked at Malome when she asked me. He looked at his shoes. So I did not tell, did not reveal that the secret I carried was mine and his.

Mama banished me to live with Rakgadi far away in Gaborone. She came to see me after the baby was born. I watched her hold Keineetse and almost drop him when he opened his eyes. My son had round eyes, with lashes so long he should have been a girl.

I remember saying slowly: "I tried to tell you Mama, but you wouldn't listen. Malome is the father of my child Mama."

I watched her as I spoke, and I saw the light in her eyes die.

I didn't see Malome again until Keineetse was eighteen years old – the day he appeared at the door of my four-roomed house. He had held my hands again. His hands seemed shorter, more wrinkled. Specks of dirt were

trapped under the fingernails and the long nail on his left little finger was still there.

But I was no longer Marang, the young girl who loved the sun. I had become MmaKeineetse, mother of Keineetse. I was as strong as the *morula* tree that grew by our fence, and when I shouted “Boela ko o tswang teng,” Malome fled. I had meant for those words to keep him away, but I should have known he would come back. Guilt weighs a person down. I know that. I feel it now, making my heart heavy.

The living room lights flicker. I get up to recharge the electricity meter before the house goes completely dark. Maybe my son will see the lights on and come home. I stay up waiting, listening for the sound of him opening the gate.

My Blood

IN MY childhood dreams, my father was a black giant, towering over me and my mother, with a lion's roar that shook our corrugated iron roof and made me cower under the bed. Mama rarely spoke about my father but when she did, she wielded him like a threat. "If your father were here he would deal with you," she warned, so I grew up fearing him, as I did Dimo, the ogre of Setswana fairytales.

I was thrilled about turning 21, but I still remember when I turned sixteen. Anticipation had lodged itself in the pit of my stomach, growing heavier as my birthday approached. I stood in front of the mirror and rubbed my chin, feeling for signs of manhood but finding only the same three scraggly hairs that had been there forever. Only my voice had changed – now so deep that Mmamogolo Bontle, my mother's older sister, called me Barry White.

"Genes and environment mould a person," is what our Biology teacher had told our class. That is why my birthday was so important. Mama had said she would tell me when I turned sixteen. She had said she would, and mothers always told the truth.

I had missed football practice so I would get home early. Mama's "Happy birthday to you" ushered me through the front door. I smiled as she lit sixteen candles on the homemade cake, but inside I was shouting: "Finish already Mama!" As soon as she did her final "Hip, Hip, Hurrah," I said: "Tell me Mama."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me about my father."

Maybe she thought I had forgotten, but her promise was like my football scar, fading with the years but always there.

"He was killed by a train when you were just a baby."

"You told me that before Mama. What was his name?"

"His name was Ditso. Ditso Aobakwe – from Tonota."

"Like you?"

"Like us, Keineetse."

"Do I look like him Mama?" I searched Mama's face, hoping she would say yes.

Mama did not answer. Slowly, she opened the metal trunk that served as a table. She took out an old black photo album and blew the dust off it. She opened it and pulled out a black and white photo with a crease running diagonally from one corner to the other.

"Keineetse, this is your father," she said and handed me the picture.

Just then someone pounded on the front door.

"Ko ko!" It was Mmamogolo Bontle, my mother's sister. Long ago she had been the village beauty queen. "Beauty, the beauty queen," is how she introduced herself

to everyone she met. She ran a hair salon-cum-shebeen from her back rooms and favoured skin-tight pants which made her look like a Russian sausage – over-filled and about to split at the seams. When she laughed, which was often, she exposed her gold tooth.

She was laughing then as she swept into the sitting room – even before I reached the front door.

“Happy birthday Keineetse. You are such a beeg boy now.”

Mmamogolo always spoke English when she had been drinking. She smelt of alcohol and fresh nail polish so I held my breath when she kissed me. She held out a box, done up with ribbons the same pink as her long fingernails. “For you.”

I stripped the wrapping paper off the present. It was the walkman I had wanted for so long but never dreamt I would ever own because it was so expensive.

“Thank you, Mmamogolo,” I said and she winked at me. Then she looked at Mama long and hard, and asked, “Did you tell him?” My mother nodded.

“I told him his father’s name. He knows his father was killed by a train when he was a baby.”

Mmamogolo rested her hands on her hips, shook her head and pressed her lips together as if to lock in the other words that threatened to escape. She waved me away and closed the door, but her voice snaked under the door and into my ears.

“Killed by a train? Ao? That is what our grandparents used to say about useless men who made babies and left them to grow like weed,” she whispered.

I went to my room, wishing I had not heard Mmamogolo’s words for they created discordant sounds in my head. Terena? A train? But that was how my friend Tshepo’s father died, and he came from the other side of the country. And the girl who lived behind us; her father had been hit by a train too. But only one railway track ran across Botswana.

I lay on my bed, put my walkman on and turned the volume up to drown out their voices, but they scratched my heart and made my head ache. I got out of bed, knelt on the bare concrete and prayed that things would be all right – but today the longing in my soul shoved the prayers away, creating pockets of doubt in me. When I was younger and I felt that way, I would ask Jesus to please bring me a father. Tonight I just prayed for quiet.

I climbed back onto my bed and lay with the candle burning so I could study the man in the picture – Ntate, my father. I do not remember falling asleep.

I was woken by the sound of a cock crowing. Mama always said it was reminding the sun to rise, and as if in response, rays of sunlight filled my room. I slid my legs off the bed and pulled out the photo from under my pillow. I went to the sitting room and tucked my father into the frame of my confirmation picture. Then I shifted Mama’s best tea set to the second shelf of the wooden room

divider so my dad and I sat right on top. Now everyone who visited would see that I had a father too.



Two years later, on the last day of my form five exams, I took the long route home, past the clinic where women of all ages queued to get their babies weighed. Outside the *kgotla*, where village meetings were held, someone was on the loudspeaker begging people to come and listen to their MP. I turned into our street, kicking pebbles off the dusty path that led home.

A banged-up truck filled the gap in the fence where the gate would go when Mama had enough money to buy one. As I walked round our four-roomed house to the kitchen, the staccato voices hit me like an axe chopping wood.

“Boela ko o tswang teng!”

It was my mother, speaking in a voice I did not know she possessed. When she saw me standing in the doorway her mouth froze and her words seemed to hover over us. And then they spoke together, and the clash of their voices made me turn and fly out of the yard. I watched the house from the shade of the big *morula* tree across the road.

The man did as my mother demanded. I heard a car door slam and the drone of the engine as the truck sped

out of the yard, scattering fluffy white chicks in the dust it left behind.

All night, voices in my head echoed Mama's shouts: "Just go back where you came from."

The next morning I heard slow, ponderous footsteps as Mama dragged her slippers along the passage. I heard the door squeak open and listened to the swish-swish of the grass broom against the earth as she swept away the man's footprints.

When she knocked on my bedroom door, I feigned sleep.

"Keineetse, only lazy men stay in bed until the sun warms their blankets. Just because schools have closed doesn't mean you can sleep all day. Get up now."

I heard the front door close and watched my mother walk through the empty space where the truck had stood. After she boarded a kombi, I got out of bed, went outside to brush my teeth then started cleaning the house. As I dusted, I wondered who the stranger from the night before was. I felt like I knew him. I needed to know, but when I asked Mama that evening, she pressed her lips into a straight line and twisted her finger rosary round and round.



Months later I still thought about that man sometimes. He looked like someone I knew but I didn't know who.

The telephone rang and I raced inside the house to answer.

"Hello. I would like to speak to Keineetse Gontse." It was a man who spoke as though a lion lived in his throat.

"Speaking."

"Is that Keineetse Gontse?" He cleared his throat.

"Yes, it is."

"I am Ditso Aobakwe."

I did not respond. The name roused the voices that played deep in my soul. And the baritone said slowly, "I am your father."

"No. I think you may have the wrong person. My father is dead."

"Nooooo. You are my son. I am your father."

My legs buckled. Who was this impostor, calling himself my father? My father was dead – killed by a train when I was just a baby. That is what my mother had told me, and mothers did not lie.

I squeezed the phone so hard my fingers throbbed. The voice recited numbers and then said: "Go siame."

I responded without thinking: "Go siame, Ntate," and I held the phone to my heart before putting it down.

I scrambled on the floor for a pen and paper to jot the numbers down before time mixed them up. 2-8-5... I had called him Ntate without even thinking. Ntate... father.

Leaning my head against the wall, I tried to breathe normally, but every part of me was shaking. A cold rage

grabbed my mother's favourite vase and flung it against the wall. I paced to the front door, punched it and walked back again but the fury coiled itself tighter around me.

I made a cup of bush tea and sank into my mother's "peace and quiet" chair. The sun crept away as I searched for, but did not find, peace. When I remembered my tea, it had gone cold. In my stomach, a weight sat unyielding, like a meal of *phaleche* on a hot summer day.

It grew heavier as I watched the moon draw shadows in the room. One of them became a giant that stood menacingly by the door. My stomach growled as I got up to close the curtains and, as I switched on the lights, I wondered fleetingly whether my mother's Milk of Magnesia wouldn't flush the feeling away.

Mama. I had to escape before she came home – before I did something I would regret.

I banged the front door and ran out of the yard, across the road that ran in front of the new China store that sold everything, past the nursery school gate where I used to wait for Mama to come and walk me home. I was not sure where I was going and didn't stop until I found myself outside Mmamogolo Beauty's house. There was the usual old-hits music coming from her yard. Above the voices, Mmamogolo was crooning to "Midnight train to Georgia." I wove through the tables and cigarette smoke. She went silent when she saw me, beckoned, then she steered me back the way I had come through the room full of drinkers and straight to her bedroom.

“Keineetse, what is it?” She held me so close I could feel her heartbeat. “Come, come my boy.”

I felt the way I did the time I crossed the Botswana border and reached the South African side too late to enter. I spent the night marooned between the two countries, but I had walked back to the Botswana side, the place I knew and felt safer in.

I lay on Mmamogolo’s bed. In my head I straddled two people who had once loved enough to create me. I no longer knew who I was. When I opened my eyes, it was morning and Mmamogolo was sitting across from me, staring at my face.

“Go tla siama, my boy. Go home. Your mother is worried about you,” was all she said as I got up and took the long walk home.

The glass was gone from the floor. In the sitting room my mother sat by the window, staring out at the road that led out of Gaborone, wringing her hands and shaking her head as though disagreeing with a voice inside her. When she turned to look at me and I saw her red eyes, I swallowed the names I wanted to hurl at her. But I had to know why.

“Dumela mma. Tell me Mama. Why did you tell me my father was dead?”

“Because to me he is dead. But go – go and see him, my child. He is an old man now.”

As I left the room she whispered, “Ask him where he has been all these years.”

When Mama peeped into my room the next morning, I pretended to be asleep. As soon as I heard the front door close I dialled the number on the piece of paper.

The phone just rang. I tried again. 2-8-5...

"Hello?"

"Hello." I was sure he would answer, but a woman's voice spoke instead. "May I speak to Rre Aobakwe Ditso?"

"Who is speaking?"

I had practised the words in front of the mirror, but now when I needed to speak, empty spaces replaced the words I wanted to say. I cleared my throat and tried again.

"My name is Keineetse," I said, and the voice gasped into my ear.

"Keineetse. Your father said you would call. You must come. Please come as soon as you can. Your father needs to see you. Come," the voice urged, "before it is too late."

Too late? It had been too late on the day he went away. I was not sure I would go. I was so fearful of what I would learn. My pal Tshepo had gone looking for his father too and his father had tried to give him money. Damn. As if money would make it right. But I had to know. By day, I kept to myself and skirted my mother's eyes. Bedtime brought dreams of Dimo. On the fourteenth night the decision was made for me.

I was with Mmamogolo Bontle, in the hair salon, helping her pack boxes of hair relaxer.

"Shh, quiet. It's ten to eight, time for *Ditatolo*. My boy, you know I'm not superstitious, but the way that chicken has been perched in the tree all day – it's telling

us someone has died.” She turned the volume higher on the radio and pulled her chair right next to it and sat with her head bowed. Mmamogolo always listened to the death announcement programme. She said with so many people dying, you just never knew who might go without you knowing. But tonight we didn’t know any of the names that were read out in the nasal monotone.

I was climbing up the ladder again when the announcer said: “We regret to announce the passing of Mr Aobakwe Ditso of Tonota. He died Tuesday April 4th and will be laid to rest on Saturday, April 8. May his soul rest in peace.”

I nearly fell off the ladder as I climbed down. My hands were shaking. Now I *had* to go to Tonota. The funeral was tomorrow.

“I will go with you,” Mmamogolo offered. But I shook my head.

“No... no, but may I take your van?”

“Yes, you must leave tonight.”

I went home to get a pair of black trousers, jacket and tie. I waited till I knew Mama was asleep. Then I left for Tonota. I drove slowly, braking frequently to avoid black cows whose shapes were swallowed by the tarmac.

I arrived at dawn, parked the car on the side of the road and watched as the village came alive to bury its dead: women in German-print dresses with their scarves tied on their heads and men with hats scurried across the village. I asked an old man where Aobakwe Ditso’s house was. “Follow the tarred road until you get to a big *mophane* tree, take a left turn and just go straaaigh, straight. You

will see the tent,” said the man, “I would come with you but I’m going to another funeral.”

The military green tent cloaked the yard like a giant umbrella of mourning. Someone handed me a funeral programme as I walked through the gate. I stared at the picture of the man on the front page. It was me, twenty years from now. A woman came towards me, covered her mouth with one hand when she saw me, then she wrapped her arms around me. My own arms hung down at my side like wooden slats, stiff and unbending.

I followed the mourners into the house and saw my father lying in the coffin. Everyone went to the graveyard next, but I stood on the fringes of the crowd. When the priest called for the family to scatter soil in the grave, I stood rooted to the spot. His wife and children, two boys and a girl, stood up and walked to the grave. Their names were listed in the obituary as the people he had left behind; my name was not there, so I stood and watched. I returned to my father’s home and washed my hands with the other mourners in the aluminium bath that stood outside the gate.

It was done. I walked slowly to the van, turned it around on the narrow road and started the long drive south – back to Gaborone to the only home I had ever known, the one my mother made for me. Maybe one day I would know the truth about why my father had left me.

As I approached the railway crossing, the blast of a train horn shook me from my thoughts. I braked hard and watched as it rumbled by.

I had finally met my father – the father I thought I did not have. No longer will I search for my blood in the men I see, because I was mirrored in his face: the receding hair line, flared nostrils, sunken hollows for cheeks, and round eyes with eyelashes that my mother said belonged on a girl. But he had shrunk.

Six Pack

“BEWARE OF six-pack.”

Foreigners whisper the code to each other. It signals the start of Operation Clean Up. Uniformed men hunt in packs of six. Their orders are to stop, search and arrest all illegal immigrants.

Freedom hears the warning. Too late.

As she slides under the bed, her door is flung open. Scrambling to her feet, she lunges for the red, white and blue plastic hold-all Batswana call “mozimbabwe.” She runs but stumbles.

Her labour spills onto the floor: sanitary pads, cakes of blue soap and pills for her husband. Clinging onto what is left of her bag, she plunges into the night, but black boots thunder after her. Caught, she is loaded onto the back of a Landcruiser to await deportation to a motherland that has usurped her choices.



It's been a month since the Botswana truck deposited her and a hundred others at the border to Zimbabwe. As she lies next to her husband, she remembers when she first left her country.

Armed with her passport, she had taken what inflation had left of their savings and boarded the bus for Botswana, the land of plenty. She did not know her exact destination, but trailed behind those who had made the trip before and prayed that she would return before her ailing husband succumbed.

Using her savings, she paid for a place to rest and slept among others like her, packed ten to a tin-walled room, like sardines. For two weeks she paced Gaborone's streets, ending up on the corner of White City, alongside her country-mates. All day she stood with her palm upturned, pleading with the drivers of cars that sped past to give her work.

"I can wash, clean, do anything," her eyes begged.

She would do anything to earn money – except sell her body.

The day her money ran out, just as the moon appeared, a car crawled past the jobseekers. It stopped. The crowd raced towards it. The strong ones reached the driver before her. He rolled down his window a little, sized them up, one by one, and singled her out.

"You with the beautiful eyes, get in."

She hesitated, but hunger opened the car door and perched her on the leather seat. The man parked in the

bushes and steered her through the darkness to the place where she had heard women's souls got stripped.

She entered the room and lay on the bed.

The protest of bedsprings muffled the voices that chanted in her head: "Prostitute, prostitute." Her heels scratched his legs as he crushed his body against hers. Her skin looked tar-black against his brown, like the liquorice sweets her husband loved.

She heard water splashing in the bucket as he cleansed himself of her, then silence.

A hollow remained in the bed where his body had shifted the lumps in the mattress. She sniffed the air. It smelled of illicit sex. She ran her fingers across the side table. Her hand returned with specks of dust, an empty condom wrapper and a 50 Pula note. She dressed, stuffed the money between her breasts and walked back to the corner to await another buyer. Her shame blended into the night.



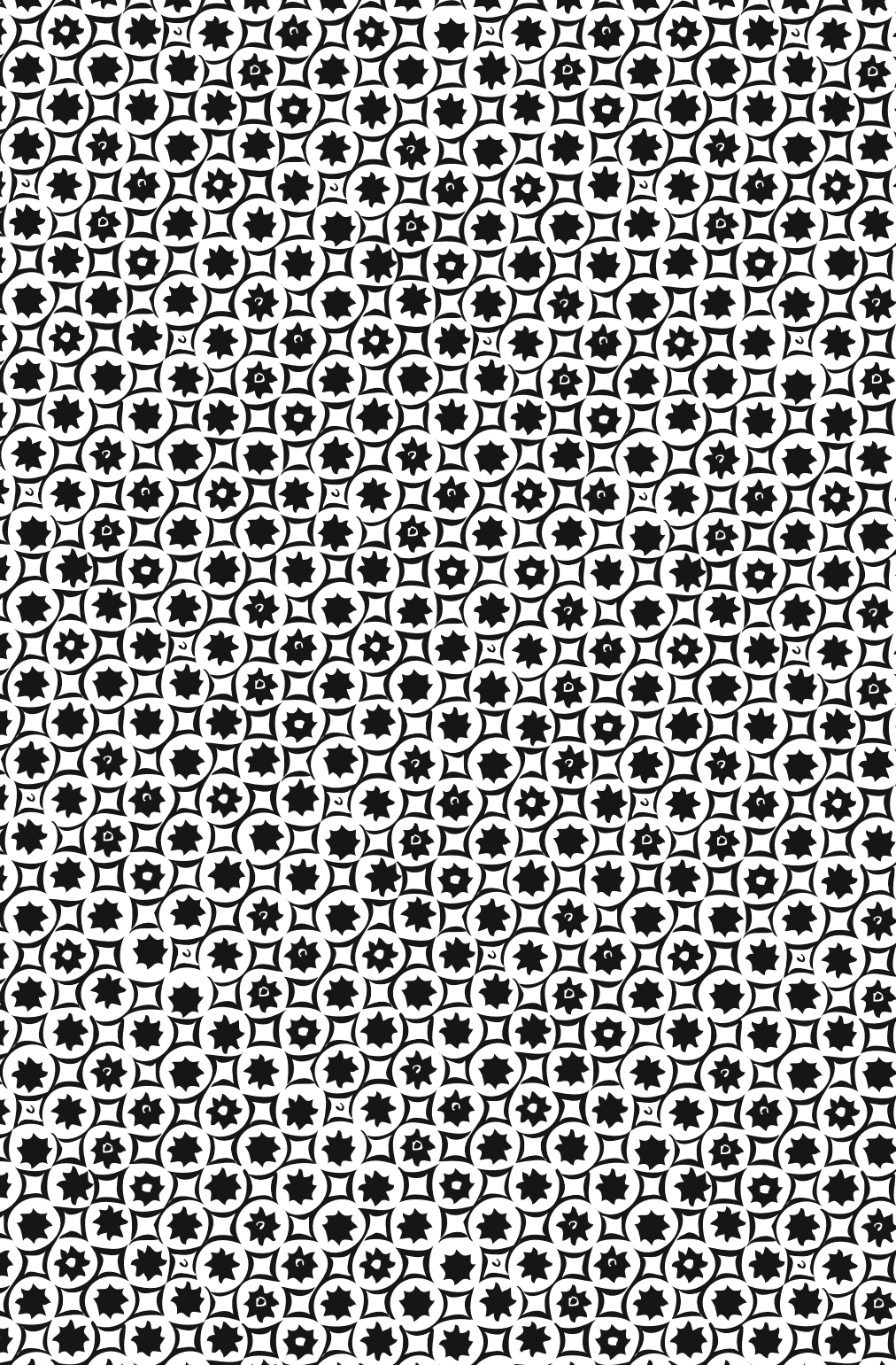
She opens her eyes and finds her husband studying her face. He pulls her closer but she escapes his embrace.

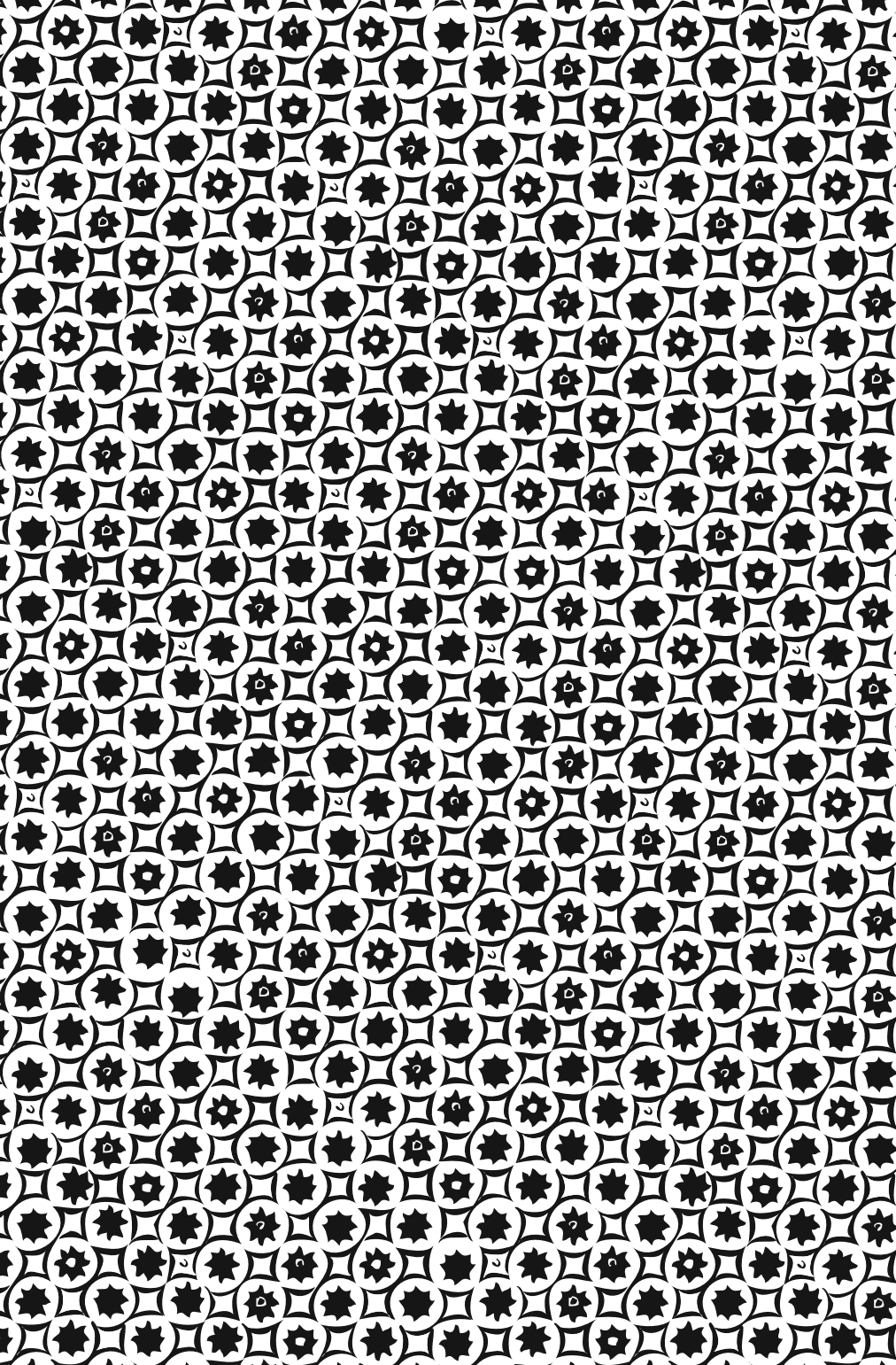
"When you are better," she promises.

The pills and food are healing him, but the medicine is finished and the cupboards are bare now. She kisses his

forehead, picks up her empty mozimbabwe and closes the door behind her.

Six-pack or not, she must return to Botswana.





Glossary

A glossary is provided for instances where non-English words and phrases are not glossed in the story or where the meaning is not clarified through context.

B *Batswana*: the name of the people from which the country name, Botswana, is derived.

Biltong: dried meat, usually beef; jerky.

Boela ko o tswang teng: Go back to where you came from.

Bogadi: bride price.

Bogobe: a soft porridge, often made with ground sorghum.

D *Ditatolo*: radio programme announcing deaths.

Doek/s: from Afrikaans, generally “cloth,” here “headscarf.”

Dumelang bo mma le bo rra: form of greeting, addressing more than one women or man.

Dumela mma/ Dumela mma. O teng, mma?: form of greeting.

E *Eish*: exclamation; can express different emotions, e.g. surprise, resignation, impatience.

F *Fiela, fiela, fiela ngwanyana*: sweep, sweep, sweep girl. From a popular Setswana song.

G *Ga ke mo itse*: I don't know him/her.
Go siame: It's okay (used as a way of saying goodbye).
Go tla siama: It will be alright.

I *Ijaaaa! Monna, ke Mercedes o montsho. O o bone monna?*: Hey man, it's a black Mercedes. Did you see it, man?

K *Ke nna mooki. Botsbelo ga a hvala bagaetsbo*: I am/was the nurse. Botshelo was not ill.
Kgotla: place for holding village meetings.
Ko ko: knock knock.

L *Leteisi/mateisi*: dresses made from German-print fabric, typically worn during traditional ceremonies.

M *Magwinya*: Afrikaans "vetkoek", literally "fat cake" – a small, fried dough "cake" or "fritter".
Malome: Uncle; literally "Malome" means "my mother's brother", but it is also used as a form of address for older men, even if not a blood relative.
Mmamogolo: Aunt; mother's older sister.
Mooki: nurse, care-giver.
Mophane: a tree found in arid regions of Southern Africa;
Mophane worm: a caterpillar which feeds on mophane leaves. Anglicised as "mopane."
Morogo: any of a variety of leaves eaten as greens, known as wild or African spinach.
Morula: a fruit-bearing tree.
Motswana: singular of Batswana.

- N** *Ngwana o itsiwe sereto ke mmaagwe*: The child's totem is best known by its mother.
Ngwana wa rona o re tlogetse re solofetse go le gontsi mo go ene:
Our child left us when we still expected so much from her.
Nkuku: grandmother/granny.
Ntatemogolo: grandfather/grandpa.
- P** *Phaleche*: stiff/thick porridge made with mielie meal (corn meal).
- R** *Rre*: Mister (form of address).
Russian sausage: a large, vienna-like sausage called 'Russians' in Southern Africa.
- T** *Tanki, ngwetsi yame*: Thank you, my daughter in law.
- V** *Vee*: a popular Motswana singer.
- Z** *ZCC*: Zion Christian Church.

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Wame Molefhe started writing short stories in 2005. In 2008, she left her full time job to write. She freelances for a number of publications and also writes for TV, *Just Once*, her children's collection of short stories was published in 2009. *Go Tell the Sun* is her second short story collection.



WAME MOLEFHE's stories have a gentle, unassuming yet intimate and captivating feel to them. Set in Botswana, the stories trace the lives of characters whose paths cross and re-cross each others', some times in and through love, at other times through tragedy. And through them the author brings to bear a woman's perspective on the societal mores in which sexual abuse, homophobia and AIDS, among others, flourish and spread. The social content and views are never proclaimed as a loud agenda; instead, it forms a 'natural' backdrop to the lives of the characters, something that may raise a wry comment or thought in one character, while eliciting a mere shrug from another. Molefhe's voice is, to some extent, a world-weary voice, weary of all she has seen of society's failures, but never without the gentleness often absent and much needed in broken societies, and never without the hope and redemption that can be found in love and the imagination.

— Rustum Kozain



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